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HER HUSBAND'S

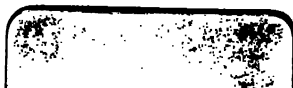


KEEPER.





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HER HUSBAND'S KEEPER.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. MACKENZIE-DANIEL,

AUTHOR OF "ESTHER DUDLEY'S WOOERS," "THE OLD MAID
OF THE FAMILY," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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HER HUSBAND'S KEEPER.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE CYPRESSES.

THERE was not a shopkeeper in all Ditchley who did not put up at least one of his shutters on the day of Mrs. Fletcher's funeral, neither was there a working man or woman in all the town who did not contrive, whatever the occupation that had to be suspended for the purpose, to get a glimpse of the long, black procession, as it wound its way slowly and solemnly down the principal street, and out into the broad sunny high road leading to the new cemetery—the one object of picturesque attraction of which the Ditchley people were so excusably proud.

For Ditchley was, in truth, a singularly ugly little town, possessing in itself no claim

whatever to the admiration of any passing stranger, and rarely tempting the idlest traveller to linger one unnecessary hour in its vicinity.

In the old stage coach days it had been known as one of the smaller posting towns on the great northern road, and it had also once had a reputation for the manufacture of gloves; but though a very capital inn, called "the Stag's Head," was still kept up, and though a few shops, where superior riding and driving gloves were sold, still remained, the actual glories of Ditchley had all departed; and the very few families of any social rank who had their homes in the town, or its immediate neighbourhood, candidly acknowledged that they only stayed because they could not help it.

But the new cemetery, which owed its origin to a happy thought of a retired tailor, with money and a liberal spirit, was a boon welcomed by all classes with equal gratitude and enthusiasm. Its site had been chosen on the slope of a green hill, about a mile from the town, just a nice distance for the

people who were hard at work all the day to walk out to on a summer's evening. A charming place for neighbours and gossips to meet, and hold their sage discussions in; especially a charming trysting place for rustic sweet-hearts who, full of buoyant, happy life—the double life they enjoy, in virtue of their attraction to each other—count the sighing of the mournful cypresses pleasant music, and are rather elated than depressed by all the outward suggestions of decay and death around them.

The planting of the Ditchley cemetery had not luckily been left, even mainly, to the taste of the retired tailor. Mr. Fletcher, of the Hall—(David Fletcher as he was usually called, because there was another Squire Fletcher living not far off)—who had, in fact, contributed largely towards the purchase of the land, undertook the supervision of this part of the work himself, and probably on account of his long residence in France some years ago, he chose to plant this rural English burying-ground wholly in the foreign style, with very few flowers, and those of the

least gaudy kind, but with rows and rows of dark cypress and yew trees, under which he thought it seemly that the dead should be laid to their quiet rest.

David Fletcher, however, was a strange man, and on most subjects his thoughts and opinions were esteemed peculiar.

The gossips of Ditchley considered it a striking fact that Mrs. Fletcher, of the Hall, —the wife of the gentleman who had taken so warm an interest in the laying out of the new cemetery, and who was still at the time of her death a comparatively young woman, —should be the first to rest under those solemn cypresses, which, to the unpoetic mind, appeared rather to mar than to increase the attractiveness of the place. Many humble graves had been filled since the opening of the cemetery, but these were in the lower and sunnier part of the ground; whereas the yew and cypress avenues had been planted chiefly on the summit of the hill, where the winds of heaven could sweep freely and freshly through them, and the western sun tinge the dark melancholy foliage with a passing glory and brightness.

Mrs. Fletcher's last earthly resting-place was undoubtedly a very sweet spot to those who could appreciate its calm twilight beauty, and the fact that she would, for awhile at least, be its solitary tenant, was not one that would have affected the great lady while living, very much more than it could, in reality, affect her now that she was dead. Possibly, had she been consulted on the subject, she would have chosen an utterly isolated grave, the links which had bound her to her fellow-creatures in general, and especially to the commoner humanity immediately surrounding her, having been always of the slightest and most brittle kind. She had, it is true, bade farewell for ever now to earth and all its hollow distinctions; but even death has its privileges, and the woman over whom the solemn words, "ashes to ashes—dust to dust," have to be pronounced to-day, would certainly have deemed the fact of her own dust being given back to its kindred earth a wholly insufficient reason for the dust of inferior mortals being allowed to repose too close beside it.

"All the kings of the nations lie in glory,
Every one in his house—*Why not thou ?*"

But leaving the subject of this dead lady for the present—I shall have to say a good deal more about her by-and-by—I wish to introduce my readers to the mourning husband, to David Fletcher, the widower, as he stands bareheaded, and in an attitude of profound mental absorption, looking down into his wife's open grave. The clergyman is about to begin reading that part of the burial-service which precedes the lowering of the coffin into the yawning ground made ready for it; numerous spectators of the humbler classes are gathered in knots at a respectful distance from the principal group, which is composed only of Mr. Fletcher, his two daughters, who stand one on either side of him, and are sobbing audibly (though probably with not more demonstration than they can help on such an occasion), and the family physician, looking warm, and not especially interested or impressed by what is going on.

In figure, David Fletcher is just a little

above the middle height, with broad, massive shoulders, much too high to be graceful, though not reaching to the point of absolute deformity. Nevertheless, this unfortunate gentleman *is* deformed very seriously in his right hip, which grows out in a most unsightly manner, owing to an accident met with in childhood, and gives to his gait an awkwardness and a singularity far too marked to be spoken of as mere lameness, though, of course, it is this too.

But as he stands now in that perfectly motionless attitude, the closest observer would fail to detect in him anything different from other men, anything, at least, that had a tendency to make sensitive people shrink from looking at him unnecessarily, and inclined all to speak of him with a compassion that, in as far as it never reached or touched its object, was calculated to hurt rather than to heal.

Poor David Fletcher! And yet what a noble majestic face and head surmounted that marred, ungraceful body! What a splendid man he would have been, phy-

sically, had destiny not played him that shabby trick in his young, growing days. It was a face that no thoughtful person could see without at once speculating concerning the mind, to which, after all, it was a very imperfect, if not an absolutely deceptive, index. The wide and not too lofty forehead, the admirably shaped head, with soft, silky chestnut hair thickly covering it, the deep-set grey eyes, the large Roman nose, and the well-proportioned, delicately-curved mouth, with chin unbearded, as was the fashion of the day—all seemed to proclaim an intellect of a high order; and yet David Fletcher was never described or thought of as an eminently intellectual man.

A more careful survey of his features would perhaps suggest the idea that where sadness and depression of so apparently chronic a nature had taken entire possession of the individual, there was little room left for the development of the most promising intellect. There was, as I have said, nobility, majesty, sweetness, and a fine

intelligence, at least, in David Fletcher's countenance at all times ; but dominating over every one of these was its expression of fixed and profound melancholy—not such a melancholy as is born of a sudden grief, and which, however genuine and intense for the time, seems really foreign to the aspect in which it is detected, but a melancholy that the beholder felt at once belonged to the very nature of the man, and was as inseparable from him as the beating human heart, whose chords had never apparently been tuned to any but the most sorrowful music.

And now my reader knows as much of David Fletcher as was known and observed by the world in which he lived—not a large world by any means, or one given to dive very deeply below the surface of things in general, but still possessing, in common with all humanity, a fair amount of inquisitiveness, as well as a strong tendency to mistrust whatever it could not readily understand.

“For they rest from their labours.”



Throughout the whole service which had preceded these words the bereaved husband had never once lifted his head from its bowed posture, never moved a muscle of his face, never given token of any sort that he was attending to what was going on, or listening with his bodily ears to a single sentence amongst the many solemn ones that were being read, and read for his edification and solace even more, it must be presumed, than for the edification and solace of the less interested bystanders. Perhaps, until now, he really had been utterly absorbed in his own sombre and dreary thoughts, taking a brief and agitated retrospect—this, at least, would have been natural—of the life he had led with the woman whose body was being committed to the dust to-day, making stern inquisition with himself as to his own fulfilment of the sacred obligations they had mutually undertaken at God's altar, in a time that seemed so long ago (though in point of fact it was less than eighteen years) that it might have been part of another age. But be this as it

may, David Fletcher was certainly recalled from a dream-land of some kind, as the senior curate of Ditchley read, in an impressive voice, those very impressive words—

“For they rest from their labours.”


He did not start or groan, or even sigh audibly; but he lifted his head abruptly, almost with a jerk, passed his hand slowly over his forehead, and then earnestly contemplated the curate—though with eyes that nobody could for an instant suppose were really seeing only the Reverend Caleb Jones—during all the remainder of the service. When it was quite over, this last named gentleman, with a very mournful and lengthened face, as was proper on the occasion, shook hands first with Mr. Fletcher, and then with the two weeping young ladies,—his example being followed by the tired-looking doctor,—but none of the party spoke, and Mr. Jones considerably went on in advance, to clear a path through the cypress avenue for the three mourners to walk, side by side, to the carriage waiting for them at the bottom of the hill.

The crowd behaved very well, not staring or whispering a bit more than crowds are privileged to stare and whisper at so exciting an event as the funeral of a great lady, and being especially happy in this one thing—that they gave and could give no offence to that dead lady's entirely preoccupied and sorrowing survivors, who, probably, had they been asked the question, could not have told with any accuracy whether the Ditchley Cemetery that June day held one spectator or a hundred.

They drove home together—father and motherless girls—in absolute and unnatural silence. Whatever the depth and character of the anguish or desolation each was feeling, there seemed nothing in it imperatively needing sympathy, or that was calculated to draw these three stricken ones nearer to each other. The girls had left off crying, but they both looked woe-begone and miserable, while the elder, who was noticeably handsome even in her misery, had in addition, a marble stoniness of aspect that aged her by at least half a dozen years.

Once, as she stretched out a white ungloved hand to let a breath of air into the close atmosphere in which she, at any rate, was stifling—(they had left the sunny high road now, and entered upon a comparatively shaded thoroughfare leading direct to the Hall)—her fine eyes—fine in spite of their coldness—sought her father's face for a moment, and dwelt upon it with little tenderness and not one grain of sympathy—then, with a curling lip, quivering too, poor child, even while it curled—David Fletcher's daughter retired anew into her own world of strange and unfamiliar sorrow, possibly wondering that any emotions but those of utter wretchedness could be found in the heart of a human creature just bereft of a fond and almost exclusively beloved mother.

David Fletcher had once more to rouse himself from some absorbing train of thought as the mourning coach drew up suddenly at his own doors. With an apparently impulsive gesture he reached out his arms towards his youngest daughter, and gathered her into their embrace for an instant, she



neither repulsing him nor showing any loving reciprocity of this spasmodic tenderness. Then he released her with a sigh that had in it a whole world of pathos, for all its gentleness, and just touched with his lips the cheek of the other girl who was facing him with her marble visage.

"For mercy's sake open the carriage door and let me get out; I am suffocating in this heat!" said Elizabeth Fletcher, in a tone that almost suggested the grinding of her dainty teeth under the insolent imperiousness of her words. "Why should you mock us by a weak pretence of sympathy which we know you do not and cannot feel? Amy and myself shall learn to be strong at least in our misery, as she we have lost would wish us to be."


David Fletcher unfastened the carriage door, and handed both his daughters out. He avoided looking at either of them as they passed before him up the broad stone steps, and through the already widely opened hall doors—for the servants, thinking to show respect, had assembled in a body to receive

their master and the poor young ladies on their return from "the missis's" funeral.

Then, while the two girls—beginning to sob anew as they entered the familiar home, never more to be shared with the mother who, at any rate, had earned her children's love, and whom they had now left *alone* under those dismal cypresses—while these two greatly to be pitied girls brushed quickly, without a word or recognizing glance, through the line of black-robed attendants, on their way to their own rooms, the master of the house, with a kind though very faint smile of acknowledgment and dismissal to his well meaning servants, opened a little door on one side of the entrance hall, and passed into a room, very simply furnished, and littered with books and papers, which he, too, was privileged to call his own.

Here, David Fletcher sank heavily upon the chair by the writing table, and burying his white face in his locked arms, did his mourning in secret for the wife of his youth.

Was it mourning, or rejoicing, or simply quiet thanksgiving at deliverance from a



weight that had been crushing the very life and soul out of him for eighteen weary years?

Poor David Fletcher! It would be hard to tell what he is feeling in this solemn hour. His face, when he lifts it at last, expresses little beyond the dull hopeless pain that is always seen in it. Only there is something of a yearning, passionate wistfulness in those deep set eyes of his, something that is in contrast with the ordinary patient endurance they suggest, as he repeats in a low voice, and in a dreamy, wondering tone—" *They rest from their labours!*"

CHAPTER II.

ELIZABETH FLETCHER.

FOR several days there occurred not the faintest break in the heavy cloud that appeared to have settled over the Hall and its inmates after Mrs. Fletcher's funeral. The young ladies chose to keep entirely to their own rooms, having all their meals brought to them there, and giving as a reason, not as an excuse, to their father (Elizabeth Fletcher would never have dreamt of apologizing for anything she thought proper to do), that they shrank from exhibiting their overwhelming despondency to the prying eyes of the servants of the establishment. Whether this was the true cause of their seclusion or not, David Fletcher knew well enough that he

lost little by losing just now, or indeed at any time for that matter, the society of his daughters, for Amy, whatever her natural disposition, was wholly under the influence of her elder and stronger minded sister, and Elizabeth from her earliest years had been on her mother's side, and learned only too readily to entertain the most bitter and unfilial feelings towards that mother's husband.

So poor David neither protested nor complained, openly, of the utter loneliness to which he was condemned during those dark mournful days. He sat idly and dreamingly in his own room, or wandered purposelessly about the grounds, all now in their fairest summer beauty, or at rare intervals took a book—making a desperate attempt at self-discipline—and tried to fix his tortured thoughts on something out of himself and his own long-standing and hopeless grievances.

For David Fletcher was not by nature an egotist or a misanthrope, or even a sentimentalist, given to a morbid taste for the lachrymose and pathetic side of human life—very far from it. He had keen capacities for

enjoyment, social and intellectual ; he had a quick eye for beauty under whatever aspect it presented itself, an ardent love of nature, an intelligent appreciation of art ; and in short, this man, whose whole life had been, hitherto, a silent if not always patient endurance of mental wretchedness, lacked nothing, constitutionally, that places a human being in a condition for receiving the fullest share of such earthly blessings as are still within the grasp of Adam's erring race.

And here, to his own apprehension at least, was the pity of it. He was created to be happy—he felt he had a right to his heritage—God's sky was smiling brightly and serenely above him ; the earth, notwithstanding its primal curse, was strewn with flowers at his feet ; hundreds of joyous and contented creatures were everywhere around him—and yet he missed his portion in it all. Stretching out yearning hands, they fell back empty at his side ; lifting up pleading eyes, they were smitten ever with the blight of a vain and futile hope ; breathing passionate prayers—far too passionate for the spirituality which

raises prayer into something higher than a human cry—they returned unanswered into his own uncomforted heart—and thus, if ever man could plead a just excuse for calling his life barren and profitless, that man was David Fletcher. And yet he had at times strong convictions that there was no absolute necessity for such a state of things, that it was rather a chain of accidental circumstances, beginning with the mistake of his early and most unfortunate marriage, which had led to the blasting of his whole existence, than the presence, in his case, of a relentless destiny which had smitten him with a curse at his birth, and set him apart for ever from his fellow men.

I say that at times David Fletcher could reason sanely and practically on this always gloomy and miserable subject; but it was only when his best and healthiest moods were upon him, when there was no immediate outward cause for remembering the strangeness and isolation of his position in the midst of those bound to him by the closest ties, and when he succeeded (it was

not often) in conquering his intense reluctance to come out of his shell, and exert himself in any way for the good of others.

No such mood was, however, at all likely to visit him during the dark and solitary days immediately following upon his wife's funeral. He was driven back too persistently into the cruel past to allow a hope of any cheerful thoughts, in connection with either the present or the future, gaining a moment's entrance into his haunted mind.

The woman who had blackened Heaven's sunshine for him during eighteen memorable years was dead—had her place under the moaning cypresses which her husband had himself planted; but her shadow was not gone from David Fletcher's hearth or home. It was seen and felt, not only in the bitter retrospective musings that came to him continually, whether he would or no, but in the more tangible form of the influence she had only too successfully exerted over the characters of the daughters she had left behind her, the children who should have been their desolate father's support and stay.

One little instance of what they really were has been already given. Here is another, which occurred about a week after the funeral, and was the first thing that roused poor David from the dull, listless stupor that day by day had been increasing upon him, and threatening to destroy whatever of energy and hopefulness remained in his nature.

Elizabeth Fletcher knocked one morning at the door of her father's private sanctum, and, scarcely waiting for an answer, entered, and stood upon the threshold, looking nearly as pale and worn and miserable as David himself.

"I am sorry to disturb you so early," she said, with her usual coldness, though he had risen instantly to greet his child with a momentary lighting up of his whole mournful face; "but I could not help it. I have had a letter which should be replied to at once. Our Aunt Meredith has written to ask Amy and myself to go and stay with her for a month or two in London. She will be very quiet this season, of course, otherwise the invitation would not have been sent. I

presume you have no objection to our accepting it?"

"Do you wish to go, Elizabeth?" asked the father, speaking rather weariedly than interrogatively, for he must have read both desire and resolve in his daughter's chilling face.

"I think we ought to go," she replied, quickly, and a little sharply (David Fletcher would have taken more sharpness for somewhat less of ice). "Aunt Isabel was mamma's favourite sister, and though I know *you* don't like her, I am sure *she* would have approved of our visiting her at any time—at this time especially. Amy and myself don't profess to be Spartans, and we can't forget that we are motherless."

"My poor girl, I don't expect you to forget it," said David mildly, though he felt wholly innocent of the rebuke implied. "You are looking ill enough, Elizabeth, to convince the most sceptical, were there any sceptics in question, that you have buried your heart in your mother's grave; and as long as you refuse to be comforted Amy will naturally

refuse to be comforted too. Poor little Amy ! she is over young, however, to sit in solitude and inaction for above a week. Tell her to come down and see me by-and-by. I will take her for a walk, or a drive if she prefers it. I wish very earnestly that both my daughters would remember they have a father, though they have been deprived, in God's Providence, of the mother they loved so much better."

A long speech for poor David Fletcher, and one that he would probably never have made but for the inexpressibly bitter thoughts and memories which had been his sole companions for the last few days. Elizabeth, for all her stoniness, winced slightly at the concluding words, but she only said—

"I will give Amy your message. But what about my reply to our aunt?"

"You can go, since you think it right to do so, Elizabeth, and since you hold my estimation of Mrs. Meredith's character so lightly. Do you know if her son is at home?"

"I neither know nor care," was the scorn-

ful answer. "Aunt Isabel does not mention him. She only says she is very miserable and depressed, and that, knowing we must be the same, she yearns to have us with her. Rhoda is there, of course ; but though she has a mission to comfort and soothe the whole world outside her own home, it never seems to occur to her that her mother has the first claim upon her society and her graciousness. Aunt Isabel just mentions in a postscript that Rhoda is as much taken up with her east-end work as ever, and that an arab in tatters or a decayed costermonger can much more easily excite her sympathy, if they only whine loud enough, than her own mother, plunged in the depths of wretchedness, and mourning the loss of a beloved sister."

"You are very young, Elizabeth," commented David Fletcher, while something almost approaching to a smile played around his mouth for an instant—"or you would see instinctively that a woman who could write such nonsense as this can have very little of the true metal in her composition. I don't

know Rhoda Meredith, but what you now tell me of her reconciles me in some degree to you and your sister being subjected to the influence of her mother. When do you propose going?"

"Early next week," said Elizabeth, declining just now to enter upon a defence of the aunt she was bent upon visiting. "We both need change, and we are no comfort to you, and I suppose we cannot ask Mademoiselle Loiseau to prolong her holiday above another six weeks, unless we get rid of her altogether."

"Which would be no regret to me," interrupted the father, looking up quickly to ascertain whether on this small point there might be sympathy between himself and his eldest daughter. "I never approved of a foreign governess for my girls, as you cannot fail to remember, Elizabeth. How should you like"—he added a little hesitatingly (for he had yet to test whether he had gained the smallest immunity from constant snubbing and thwarting by the one blank in his household)—"to dismiss Mademoiselle Loiseau,

giving her of course a liberal indemnity for the short notice, and go abroad to France and Switzerland for a year or two? Amy would learn more of the French language in six months on the Continent than she would in as many years at home, and you yourself might benefit in a variety of ways, Elizabeth. What do you say to this plan?"

Elizabeth Fletcher's face (at seventeen it is difficult to put on a mask) was saying for her that she should like it extremely, that her father's unexpected and impromptu suggestion had awakened the lightly slumbering spirit of hope and youthful gladness within her, making her feel, for the moment, that she was being lifted by invisible hands out of the dreary slough in which she had entrenched herself for so many days, and given a firm standing place on a flower-strewn earth again. But though all this would have been patent to the most casual observer of the girl's kindling features at the moment, her words, when after a short pause words came, in no wise confirmed what the handsome, striking face was declaring.

"Mamma engaged Mademoiselle Loiseau," she said with her lips compressed, probably lest any words but those her strong will was dictating should escape them; "and it will always be a point of conscience with me to oppose her being sent away until Amy's education is completed. If our going abroad, therefore, is contingent upon Mademoiselle's leaving, I must decline your offer at once, thanking you all the same. We should both have liked it."

"I am sorry then you should decide against it, Elizabeth," said Mr. Fletcher, letting go this small gourd of hope (which had withered before it was full grown) with the dull sigh that was habitual to him; "but I should like my daughters to myself if we were in a strange country. Most assuredly I should not care to be burdened with the society of a Mademoiselle Loiseau."

Perhaps he spoke with a little unnecessary warmth and decision of tone. It may be that poor David had a sudden and refreshing consciousness of being at last master in his own family, and that he could not resist the

opportunity afforded him of thus for once asserting himself, even in the presence of his eldest daughter. Anyhow, Elizabeth was quick to put some such interpretation as this upon his words and manner; and with a bitterness that was in strange keeping with her youth, she replied:—

“I might have known how it would fare with any friend or *protégée* of mamma’s, if left to your tender mercies. It does not signify. We will speak no more of going abroad, and I will look after the interests and the comfort of our poor despised Swiss governess.”

“You can return to your sister now, Elizabeth,” said the father, showing physical as well as mental weariness of this wholly vexatious interview. “Make your own arrangements with your aunt, and don’t forget to send down little Amy to me by-and-by.”

Elizabeth Fletcher threw one more haughty, unloving look at her father, and then in sullen dignity left him to his unpitied loneliness again.

CHAPTER III.


THE WIDOWER ALONE.

IF the gloom of David Fletcher's life was not sensibly increased by the absence of his daughters, who had evinced no regret at leaving him to his loneliness, it was not because he cared little for them, but rather that he had reached, while they were yet with him, a stage of mental despondency which it would have been scarcely possible to get beyond without danger to his reason.

The truth was, poor David had had far too much time for thinking lately, for looking back upon the long dreary road he had travelled with such tired feet, and this involuntary exercise of memory had been a refined torture to him almost beyond his

capacities for endurance. The outside world might picture him as rejoicing secretly and selfishly in his deliverance from the incubus that had so cruelly weighed down all his youth and manhood—and who could severely censure him if thus it had been?—but there was no rejoicing, as yet, at any rate, in David Fletcher's heart. He was feeling far too bitterly the utter failure that his whole life had been, for any emotions of even transitory or superficial gladness to find a door of entrance into his complaining spirit.

If the woman who had so recently gone to her account had simply made him miserable, the retrospect now would have been comparatively easy to endure. A past sorrow, unmingled with self-reproach, may be very depressing at times; but inasmuch as it *is* past, the human mind naturally and instinctively endeavours to shake it off, and in most cases has no great difficulty in doing so. But David Fletcher was not free from self-reproach as regarded his deplorable married life. He could not lay his hand



upon his heart and call his Maker to witness that he had not shared with his wife the fatal apple of discord which she, undoubtedly, had been the one to pluck in the very beginning of their wedded days. He could not take to himself the consolation of believing that he had done the best he could to soften and modify the faults of the hard, cold, imperious nature it had been given him to deal with. He was the man, the nominal head, the stronger vessel, and yet he had too often failed to remember—perhaps in part because of her unwomanliness—that she was the woman, the lesser man, the creature whom it would have been his interest, as it was certainly his duty, to treat with unlimited patience and forbearance, even if she would not allow him to cherish and love her, as his vows had pledged him to do, “till death should them part.”

David Fletcher was not a religious man in the highest and truest sense ; but he had always possessed a fair amount of what is called natural religion, and even this taught him that every human being is in some

measure his brother's keeper; that no one gifted with ordinary intelligence can escape the responsibility which attaches to him as an influence for good or evil over those amongst whom his lot is cast; that in the case of a husband or a wife this responsibility is of a very solemn kind, and that a strict account will be demanded of every living soul on whom it has fallen.

But quite apart from the conviction that he should be found wanting as regarded the rightful discharge of his married duties, when weighed in the balances of an unerring justice hereafter, poor David was wholly and miserably dissatisfied with himself now. To whatever point of his wedded life he turned his shrinking eyes, he could see nothing to comfort him, nothing to restore a fraction of his self respect, or to make him think with less bitterness—in view of that grave, not yet green, in the Ditchley Cemetery—of the lost opportunities which would go with him, as accusing ghosts, into all his future life.

The very utmost he could ever plead for

himself—and he did not plead even this yet—was that his influence over his wife had been only of a negative kind, that he had neither set her a bad example, nor treated her with harshness, nor, as far as he knew, done a single thing that the world could condemn him for, seeing that all their bitter disagreements, all the domestic storms of every kind, had originated with her, and been kept up, and apparently gloated over, by that strangely organized woman, long after he, in very weariness, had dropped the simply defensive weapons with which he had been goaded into meeting her attacks.

But though the perfect consciousness that this was the true state of the case had been enough for David while his wife was a living, breathing presence in his home, it was not enough now that she was dead. Her faults had not indeed died with her—as it is pretended that the gravest faults of dead people will do in the memory of those who have suffered most by them (a theory difficult to accept)—they had perhaps even acquired weight by being looked at in the

mass ; but they seemed to David Fletcher no longer the faults of his wife alone, but errors and sins in which he had a very important share, just because he had not, while the golden opportunity was his, done the very best he might to correct and amend them.

He had been occupied wholly with the question of his own personal suffering from them, and had forgotten, in the sharpness of an ever recurring individual torture, that the human creature who inflicted it had a soul that might have been ennobled and elevated, and that to him, as her husband, the companion of her daily life, had been entrusted the task, however difficult, of doing the very best he could towards such an end.

And now she was gone, with all her sins and errors upon her, to her dread account, and he was left with the memory of his life's failure, and with the children she had taught to hate him, to begin a new existence, and perhaps for twenty or thirty years more to dwell wearily and uselessly upon the

earth which had been cursed to him, and upon whose kindly bosom would never henceforth spring up the palest, lowliest flower for him.

What marvel that David Fletcher, sitting day after day alone with such ghosts as these, should esteem himself, and be in truth, a most miserable man? that he should loathe his life, notwithstanding the freedom he had at length obtained, and that the words which had so struck him at his wife's funeral should be perpetually recurring to him, with a suggestiveness that had in it all the sweetness of the sweetest music—

“For they rest from their labours.”

Poor David had at least this in common with his fellow men. The hour would come, should it be ever so remote, when he too would lie down in some quiet grave like a tired child, and rest from his labours and his sorrow.

Till then he must carry the galling burden laid upon his aching shoulders as best he might, and try to discharge his duties as a

father more faithfully and patiently than he had discharged those of a husband.

Elizabeth Fletcher wrote home regularly once a week. It was a point of conscience with this cold, proud girl, to yield that mark of outward respect to her only surviving parent. She told him of her aunt's kindness and affection to herself and Amy, of their satisfaction in being with their lost mother's favourite sister, of Rhoda Meredith's very peculiar ways, and total lack of sympathy with the members of her own family. Casually she named the fact that Herbert Meredith, their cousin, was at present somewhere abroad, and that his mother had no idea when he would be returning to England. This young man had acquired a reputation for wildness and irregularity of conduct which was so little to his credit that none of his relations were especially proud of him, though his mother, adoring him as even wiser women than Mrs. Meredith are apt to adore an only son, refused to acknowledge his faults, and openly declared that with such beauty and fascina-

tion as her darling Herbert unquestionably possessed, a few youthful errors and excesses might well be forgiven him.

David Fletcher had accidentally acquired some information concerning the mode of life chosen by his wife's nephew, and hence one of his objections to an increased intimacy with the family. Mrs. Meredith was a widow, and by no means a rich one, though she kept up a fashionable establishment for a part of every year in London, and, if report spoke truly, was somewhat less scrupulous as regards her own conduct than might have been expected of the mother of a grown-up son and daughter. As yet she was received in very good and respectable society, her husband having been a well-known scientific man with excellent connections—but many of her oldest friends had begun to stand in doubt of her, and to ask her less frequently to their houses, when Mrs. Fletcher's death obliged her to withdraw into temporary retirement; and her scheming brain foresaw a double advantage to herself in getting her young country nieces to come on a long visit to her.

By-and-by Elizabeth's weekly letter to her father contained the following paragraph :—

“ You will be surprised, and, I suppose, agreeably so, to hear that our esteemed governess has written to me to say she cannot return to us. Family matters demand her immediate presence in Switzerland, and she does not anticipate having any necessity for continuing to work for her living. I am, of course, very sorry on Amy's account, and should be much more so, but that Aunt Meredith has earnestly entreated us to accompany her to Paris for the autumn and winter. She cannot rally from the great depression dear mamma's death has so naturally occasioned her, and her medical adviser urges a complete change as soon as possible. Rhoda, strange to say, prefers remaining in England, amongst her dear friends in the slums of Whitechapel and Billingsgate, and as she has a small independent fortune of her own, poor aunt thinks it right to let her please herself. So you see now that but for Amy and me, our mother's sister would have

to go away, in her delicate state of health, quite alone, and there is not the slightest chance, she declares, of her son joining her in Paris, since he has accepted an invitation from an old college friend to spend a year with him in travelling through Norway and Denmark. Feeling sure that there would be no objection on your part to our acceding to Aunt Meredith's wishes, I have told her we will go, and I believe she has arranged for us to start next week. Please to let me know whether you would desire Amy to have a French master two or three times a week while we remain in Paris, or whether you would prefer my engaging a regular daily governess for her. I shall, of course, write to you as frequently as I have been in the habit of doing, and I should be glad to know how they are getting on in the parish with the schools and district visiting, as I am certain poor dear mamma must be dreadfully missed by every one in Ditchley. If I had been staying at the Hall I should, of course, have tried to continue her work, though it is not much in my way—but I

cannot imagine what lady the vicar will find to take the lead, now he has lost mamma. The Ditchley women are all so slow and stupid. Amy unites with me in love, and Aunt Meredith sends her compliments.

“Your dutiful daughter,

“ELIZABETH FLETCHER.”

“My dutiful daughter, Elizabeth Fletcher!” the father repeats, with a smile that is quite as pathetic as it is sarcastic, throwing down the elegantly-penned document (for Elizabeth was an accomplished young lady), and letting his joyless eyes wander round the dull room he rarely quits in these days of utterly cheerless solitude—“a fact she does well to state so plainly and concisely in the end, seeing that it is nowhere implied throughout all her long and carefully-written letter.”

And then poor David tries to smile again, but sighs bitterly instead, as he takes note of the suggestive circumstance that his daughter—his dutiful Elizabeth—is evidently more interested in learning how the

parish children say their lessons, and how the parish adults are attended to (notwithstanding her confession that these matters are not exactly in her way), than she is in hearing how her father is spending his lonely life, and whether he is sorry or indifferent concerning his children's voluntary absence.

But it has not been reserved for to-day to teach David Fletcher the mournful truth that love—even children's love—cannot be bought either with prayers or tears, and that he who is so inexpressibly wretched as to miss it in this world has no choice but to endure his exceptional fate in dumb patience, while waiting to see what the world to come will bring him.

Seizing a pen while his bitterest emotions were making fierce war in his rebellious heart, poor David writes thus briefly to his dutiful daughter:—

“When you and Amy have any wish to return to your home I shall be ready to do my utmost to make it a happy one for you.

Till then, be happy in your own way. My life is not so bright that I should ask my children against their inclination to share it with me."

And Elizabeth Fletcher, not being oppressed with any undue sensitiveness where her unloved father is concerned, reads the really passionate words with a calm smile, and tossing the letter to her sister observes complacently that it is all right, and they may now go on briskly with their preparations.

Both these girls are emerging from the shadow which their mother's death had only temporarily thrown upon their gilded pathway, but in the solemn gloom of which the husband, who has been delivered from a hated bondage, still walks, and appears likely to walk to the end—alone.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD HOUSE AT DITCHLEY.

Just on the outskirts of Ditchley, in the high road leading to the new cemetery, stood, and had stood for more years than the oldest inhabitant could look back upon, a large, square, and curiously dilapidated stone house, facetiously called by the Ditchley people "Chancery Court," from the fact of its bearing a general resemblance to those luckless dwellings which get into Chancery, and are ever after left to their fate. But the house in question could not boast the distinction of being a Chancery possession, and therefore was without this excuse for its aspect of utter desolation and rapidly increasing decay. Those who knew most about it, affirmed

that in years now long gone by it had acquired the reputation of being haunted, that tenant after tenant had left it on the briefest notice, and that at length the disgusted owner of the property—for there were somewhat extensive grounds, including a paddock, and an orchard at the back, and a large garden entirely surrounding the house—had given up his luckless mansion to the tenancy of the rats and mice, and had left the land, which might in any case have been turned to profit, to be overrun by weeds and poisonous creepers—a magnificent crop of which might be seen by the passer-by towering in some places even above the high but crumbling outer walls.

Had the landlord been a resident in Ditchley, he would probably have had the unsightly and utterly useless house pulled down. The gentry of the neighbourhood considered it such an eye-sore that they were constantly wishing its removal, but the owner lived many miles away, was not annoyed himself by the necessity of passing the gloomy building in his rides and drives,

and possibly hoped, when he remembered his unfortunate Ditchley property at all, that somebody one of these days would offer to buy the land of him, when he might throw in the house for the price of the old bricks and mortar.


And something better than this did actually occur at last—in the spring succeeding the opening of the new cemetery, and just eight months after the death of Mrs. Fletcher of the Hall.

The retired tailor who had provided his native town with a charming burying-place, and thus acquired deserved esteem and popularity, developed, soon after, a spirit of commercial speculation, which led to important results. He took a fancy for investing a few of the thousands he had saved in house property in his own immediate vicinity, and, to the astonishment of his neighbours, and quite against the serious advice of his friends, he made an offer that was considered absurdly liberal for the purchase of Chancery Court, an offer which, it is needless to say, the owner joyfully closed with at once,

doubtless chuckling over the reflection that there were still enough fools left in the world for wise men to take advantage of.

But Mr. Thomas Perkins did not deem himself a fool at all. He believed that the ugly old house was quite capable of being made comfortable and habitable, and that when put into decent repair, and properly advertised, at a moderate rent, there would be no difficulty in finding a tenant. If the worst came to the worst, he would entirely rebuild it, and live there himself. Anyhow, his native town (in which, since the opening of the cemetery, he took a double pride and pleasure), should not be vexed and aggrieved any longer by the sight of the old barn-like ruin, which in a few years more, if left to itself, would tumble to pieces, after the fashion of a house of cards.

Mr. Perkins, however, having followed his own counsel as regards the purchase of Chancery Court, was willing to listen to the suggestion of his friends in the minor matters of repairing, advertising it, and so on. And as he was far from wishing to spend



money unnecessarily, he soon came to see the wisdom of catching his tenant first, and setting about the repairs and beautifying afterwards. A cheap rent, and a flourishing description of the grounds, would be quite sure to attract some straitened head of a large family, or some lover of economy for its own sake. Mr. Perkins confessed later that he had always had in his mind's eye the vision of a superannuated lieutenant, either naval or military, coming down post haste to Ditchley, with an invalid wife and about a dozen hungry children in the back ground, and very thankfully taking a seven years' lease of the desirable and roomy premises, now offered to him for a mere song.

But the tailor's prophetic soul had entirely misled him in the present instance. The only answer received to the attractive advertisements, duly inserted in all the leading papers of the day, came from a Mrs. Bellew, who stated that, having read and liked the description of the house at Ditchley, she proposed coming down the following week to inspect it personally. This lady wrote from

London, and added in a postscript that if the place suited her she would rent it for three years, and that her family was a very small one, consisting only of herself and one daughter.

"They will want more repairs and furbishing up than would have satisfied my half-pay lieutenant," reflected Mr. Perkins, as he finished the perusal of this exceedingly lady-like letter; "but then, on the other hand, they will be highly genteel tenants, and will of course take every care of the place."

So the worthy ex-tailor consoled himself, and set promptly to work to effect a clearance of the worst of the unsightly rubbish that, during long years, had accumulated on the outside of "Chancery Court," and to do as much as the brief time given him would allow towards imparting a decent aspect to the interior of the building. To do him justice, he spared no money, no zeal, and no personal exertions, in hurrying on the business. The ladies from London must by all means receive an agreeable impression at the first; and though it cannot be denied that

Mr. Thomas Perkins became convinced, on a closer acquaintance with his own recently acquired property, that he had made but a sorry bargain, still he neither acknowledged his error, nor lost courage as to the ultimate profit he might derive from it.

The house was so large that it seemed quite a pity there were only two ladies coming to occupy it—even if they kept a couple of female servants and a boy—(Mr. Perkins amused his leisure moments in drawing fanciful pictures of their domestic arrangements) ; even in this case they could not possibly use above half the rooms there were to choose from ; and under so very natural an impression Mr. Perkins left a part of the house untouched for the time, deeming it wiser to have a few apartments made thoroughly habitable than to begin more than could by any possibility be finished before Mrs. Bellew's arrival.

When all was done that *could* be done within the very brief period, the enviable owner of the old house at Ditchley was fain to confess to himself that it looked little

tempting as a country residence. The outer walls were still discoloured from time and damp, and, where the rank and over luxuriant ivy had been taken away, showed to even greater disadvantage than they had done originally ; the grounds surrounding the dreary house, though relieved from their utterly wild entanglement of bush and bramble and rank vegetation of all kinds, were still nothing but a waste, and *could be* nothing but a waste for months to come. The paddock and the orchard were not quite so bad, but then these were not seen on first entering the gloomy iron gates that admitted to "Chancery Court," and unless Mrs. Bellew meant to keep a horse or a cow, the paddock at any rate would have little interest for her. Inside the house the few apartments that had been taken in hand had been made to present a tolerably comfortable appearance, but there were long, cold, dismal passages that seemed incapable of improvement, and there were the cheerless, dusty, cobwebbed rooms that had not been interfered with at all, where mice, and probably rats, disported themselves at

their own sweet will night and day, and where the air of discomfort and misery was so complete as to forbid the idea of even a respectable ghost having the inclination to come on the most transient visit to this part of the house.


"I'm afraid they'll never stand it," ruminated the vexed landlord, as, on the day before that on which the ladies were expected at Ditchley, he had driven over to give a last look at everything. "It wants time to turn a barn like this into a habitation for Christians. Dismal, isn't the word! that's the solemn truth, between myself and this precious bit of property. The young woman is sure to rebel, even if the old one should be willing, on account of the cheap rent, to put up with it."

But again the prophetic soul of worthy Mr. Thomas Perkins was at fault. The ladies came, took their dinner at the Stag's Head, and after a brief rest sent for the keys of the house they had come to look at, and walked over—it was a long fatiguing walk—to give the place a careful inspection.

The ex-tailor started half an hour later in his one-horse chaise, and arrived on the scene ten minutes before them.

As a matter of course, both ladies expressed disappointment on the subject of the charming residence which had been so attractively advertised, but the younger of the two not only seemed to think that her companion was quite capable of doing all the scolding, but actually spoke up bravely at last for the crushed and humbled landlord, bidding her mother remember that advertisements must necessarily make the best of things to get answered at all—that they had given Mr. Perkins no time to improve his property, and that for her part she did not doubt that the old house could be made quite delightful by-and-by.

“Ridiculous, Margaret,” growled the elder lady, trying to poke the point of her sunshade into the stony dried up earth of a space of ground that had been partially cleared near the house, “why it would take a score of gardeners every day for three months to reduce this wilderness to order—



not to mention the expense of planting it with new shrubs and flowers. We should be ruined in the first fortnight if we came here."


"Not so bad as that, mother," smiled Miss Bellew, the smile probably intended as further encouragement to the unfortunate delinquent behind, who was still writhing under the injuries inflicted on his sensitive nature by Mrs. Bellew's indignant tongue; "not so bad as that, I will answer for it. I can at any rate promise, as regards the garden, that if good Mr. Perkins here will do his part I will very cheerfully do mine. These hands"—stretching out laughingly two neatly gloved ones as she spoke—"have larger capacities than you may think, and gardening, you know, is the most graceful as well as the healthiest occupation in the world. Let us go inside the house now, since we have settled all about the outside so nicely."

"I have settled nothing, I must beg Mr. Perkins to observe," said Mrs. Bellew, with dignity (but then dignity comes so easy to

very tall large women), "and I wish, Margaret, you would not run on quite so fast. You cannot, by any amount of talking, diminish the unpleasant truth that we have been wholly misled by Mr. Perkins's elaborate advertisement, and if I should be induced, having taken this long and expensive journey with one sole object, to rent the place we are looking at, it certainly must be for a considerably smaller sum than I had been prepared to give for it—on the supposition that I should find things as they were represented."

Here Miss Bellew coloured, bit her lips, and followed her companion silently into the house.

It was not until every room (including those which had been left untouched) had been thoroughly and critically examined by the elder lady, whose depreciatory remarks and contemptuous shrugging of the shoulders grievously afflicted the meek tailor, that this insulted individual plucked up spirit to say that if Mrs. Bellew did not think the place would suit her he should be happy to defray



the expenses she had incurred in coming to Ditchley, and to hear no more about the matter.

There was something in this that caused Miss Bellew to smile in very genuine amusement, though she was careful not to let her mother discover her mirth.

That lady, having allowed Mr. Perkins to complete his sentence, turned upon him with a half wrathful, half compassionate countenance.

"I presume you are a novice in house-letting, my good friend," she said majestically, "or you would not so readily take offence when fault is found with your property, or so far forget yourself as to talk of making pecuniary compensation to a lady. I overlook it, in consideration of your ignorance of the usages of society; and now we will not waste more time, but proceed to business. What is the lowest rent you will agree to take for these undesirable premises, and what further repairs do you propose doing to them?"

It is probable, nay, almost certain, that

had there been no *Miss* Bellew in the case, or had she not at that critical moment smiled sweetly and apologetically upon the crest-fallen tailor, Mrs. Bellew would have had no choice but to return to London houseless, and with her own expenses to pay into the bargain. As it was, Mr. Perkins hesitated for a minute or two, and then said that as the young lady appeared willing to live here, and to make the best of things, he would agree to take one third less than he had originally asked for the rent, to leave the house as it was, but to pay a gardener's wages every day for a fortnight. Moreover, if Miss Bellew would choose a name for the house, he would have it carved on the stone work of the entrance gate, as it was quite time its present absurd title of Chancery Court was got rid of.

"I am sure you will be a charming landlord, Mr. Perkins," said Margaret, in such a soft, pleasant voice that it went straight to the ex-tailor's heart; "and my mother and you will, by-and-by, get on delightfully together."

Then she left Mrs. Bellew to conclude the



bargain, and strolled out alone to look at the orchard and the old thickly planted fantastically shaped fruit trees.

"I really like it, mamma," she announced, as the two ladies, very tired by this time, walked slowly back to the Stag's Head, where they were to pass the night; "and I hope you will come to think better of it too, when it is actually our home."

"Of course, I never meant to let it slip," answered the elder lady, who was in a very agreeable temper now; "only I had my terms to make with that poor soft-headed man, and if you had been less ready with your commendations, I should have got another pound or two taken off."

"Oh, you have got it quite cheap enough, mamma," said Margaret, with a little quickness, that fell scarcely short of irritation. "What are you going to name the house?"

"Well, Mr. Perkins suggested 'Abbotsmead,' and as I could think of nothing else at the moment, we agreed to call it that. I suppose you do not care?"

Miss Bellew thought Abbotsmead a pretty

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name; and then mother and daughter relapsed into silence, each possibly dreaming her separate and very different dreams concerning the coming life in this, wholly unfamiliar locality.

CHAPTER V.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

ABBOTSMEAD (to give the old house at Ditchley its new and imposing name) had been occupied about three weeks, and was beginning gradually to assume a home-like, if not yet an altogether cheerful, appearance. Mrs. Bellew had sent down her furniture (which, though not new, was very good and substantial), with one middle-aged female servant, some days before she came herself, with her daughter, to take possession. As it turned out, this servant—a very staid, reserved individual—had lived with the ladies for five or six years, and represented, now, at any rate, the whole of their domestic staff. It was discovered that on her first

arrival she had been even less enchanted with Abbotsmead than her mistresses before her, but she worked zealously, and without ceasing, to get everything in order by the time the mother and daughter joined her, and if she made any complaints then, nobody was the wiser, for the woman stayed on, and appeared to be a very slave in the service of her employers.

As my readers have made at present but an exceedingly superficial acquaintance with Mrs. and Miss Bellew, I will introduce them again with the respect and formality they deserve, choosing for the time of doing so a bright April morning, when they had been nearly three weeks at Ditchley.


The mother must come first, by right of seniority, and because there is less to be said (though possibly quite as much to be learned) about her, than about Margaret.

It is still quite early in the morning—not yet nine o'clock—but Mrs. Bellew's day has commenced at least three hours ago, and having since the eight o'clock breakfast been to her kitchen to give her orders, having also

walked once through every room, furnished and unfurnished, in the house, she is now seated on a very straight-backed chair, at the head of a large square table in the dining-room, with a heap of needlework before her, and working with a rapidity and energy that would suggest the idea that some dire necessity is laid upon her to complete a certain amount of sewing within a given time. It is, at any rate, quite indisputable that for the moment all Mrs. Bellew's heart, if she has got one, is in her needle, for the eyes are never raised, the close attention never relaxes, and not a muscle of the face proclaims that her occupation is otherwise than one of intense and absorbing interest to her.

In person, this lady is more singular-looking than attractive. Her figure, which is considerably above the average female height, is very straight, angular, and bony, while her features, partly shaded by two or three long spiral curls of gray hair, though not by any means ill formed, have a ruggedness about them which, while they

imply unusual strength of character, or of will at least, entirely forbid the hope of finding in their possessor the existence of the gentler feminine qualities. The upper part of the face denotes shrewdness and intelligence, and the eyes—a dark blue—are not unkindly in their expression; but the mouth and chin are unpleasing, too wide and too square to have any right in a woman's physiognomy, and giving the idea, in conjunction with a nameless something in the whole look and bearing of the individual I am attempting to paint, that here is a human being sufficient, in her own apprehension at least, to herself, having no belief in, and no need of, sympathy—cold, hard, passionless—a woman who may be just and honest and conscientious, who may be exacting, both in her own case and in that of others, as to the rigid fulfilment of every duty in life—as she understands duty—but who has no one womanly weakness in her whole nature, and who is consequently quite unfitted to be the companion, guide, or friend of any other woman breathing.



This, I repeat, or something akin to this, is what Mrs. Bellew's outward aspect suggests. Her real character will develop itself in the course of the present story.

In very startling contrast to the mother is the daughter, who, in her turn, has now to be made better known to the reader. Margaret Bellew is sitting at the same table with the mistress of the house, though, from the total silence that prevails, it might reasonably be supposed that neither was aware of the presence of the other. The younger lady is copying a bunch of wild flowers in water colours, but though her work appears to interest her, she looks off from it frequently, and gazes through the open window at the swaying trees outside, and the light clouds flitting across the blue sky, and whatever else her limited scope of vision can from time to time reveal to her. Occasionally, too, she glances for a moment at her companion, and never without a sort of speculative wonder in her soft and rather dreamy eyes, as if, in spite of all her opportunities, she had not yet succeeded in solv-

ing the enigma of her mother's nature, in guessing the difficult riddle which that mother's daily life presents to her.

Margaret Bellew has inherited nothing of the outward dignity or stately proportions of her only remaining parent. She is a decidedly little woman, with a slight, airy figure, which has a tendency to attire itself in the soberest and softest greys, very dainty hands and feet, and a face that is piquante and agreeable, but has no beauty in it except the eyes. Even these are not large or brilliant, or of any especially attractive colour. They are probably grey, as her hair and skin are rather fair than dark, but nobody ever thinks of the hue in admiring their peculiar softness and tenderness. Impossible to have such eyes and not be a good, a true, a loving, and a sympathizing woman. Impossible to have such eyes and not, sooner or later, have a distinctive history, sorrowful or joyous, of her own.

As yet Margaret Bellew has had no history of her own, and she has reached the mature age of thirty-one. I may confide to

those of my youngest readers who will be in danger of losing their interest in her on this account, that she looks, by reason of her short stature and pure skin, infinitely less than her years—is often, indeed, taken for twenty or thereabouts. Mr. Perkins, for instance, in describing the young lady to his wife, on the evening of his first introduction to her, declared his conviction that she was scarcely out of her teens, and although he has come to know her exceedingly well by this time, the worthy and grateful ex-tailor has never added a single year to the age of his “sweet Miss Margaret.”

It is this sweet Miss Margaret who now first breaks the silence that had so long reigned in that not over bright looking room—a silence which the elder lady, to judge by the unabated energy of her every movement, has not found the least oppressive, has possibly been scarcely conscious of, in guiding the evolutions of that mysteriously interesting bit of steel held lovingly in her tireless fingers.

“It will be a splendid morning for garden-

ing," Margaret remarks, laying down her brush for a minute, and seeming more than half tempted to spring (as such a little elastic figure could easily have done) through the open window into the soft bright outer atmosphere. "If Mr. Perkins is much longer I shall go and begin my work without him. I am sure that stolid old gardener gets on fifty times better when he knows I have a constant eye upon his movements."

"Why should he?" in a quick jerky voice from Mrs. Bellew, who always when she is sewing talks to the time of her needle and thread; "why should he, when he is paid by the job, and not by the day, an arrangement immensely to Mr. Perkins's advantage, and which he owes to my common sense suggestion. Half the people going have no common sense. It is a great pity."

Margaret has the ghost of a smile upon her face as she resumes her paint brush rather listlessly, and says—

"I am afraid I do not appreciate common sense quite to the extent that you do. At all events, I have known some very nice

people who have possessed very little of it, and my sworn knight and devoted admirer, Mr. Perkins, is amongst the number."

"Well, you are easily satisfied, Margaret, if you call that man nice," retorts Mrs. Bellew, with a little scornful laugh and shrug of the shoulders; "a poor weak-minded, soft-headed creature, who, having by simple good luck scraped together a decent fortune, has no more idea than an unborn infant how to take care of it. If he is henpecked into the bargain, he richly deserves it. I have no patience with men who squander money faster than they have made it."

"But please don't be too hard upon my friend, mamma," pleads Margaret, amused, in spite of her increasing weariness, at the elder lady's excitement (Mrs. Bellew is always excited when the spending of money is under discussion); "just think how kind he has been to me, how he helps me every day in the garden, digging and hoeing like a common labourer; what lovely flowers he has sent me from his own greenhouse, what ferns and pretty fossils he has collected for my

fernery, and, in short, what benefits of all kinds he is for ever heaping upon me, just because he is good natured, and because I took his part that first evening when you were snubbing him so unmercifully on account of his too tempting advertisement."

"Fools are always good natured," comments Mrs. Bellew; "and no doubt the man's vanity is flattered by your seeming interest in the foolish gossip he brings you daily from his foolish little provincial town. Retired country tailors don't expect to find educated young ladies ever ready to listen to their idle chit-chat. But for this gardening business, which is certainly a saving of money, I should object to your allowing Mr. Perkins's familiarity."

"New moral axiom—to save money is the first of virtues, therefore, in its rigid observance; think nothing of prejudices, and very little of principle!"

Margaret Bellew cannot resist this little unfilial satire, but she does not mean to offend, and either instinct, or knowledge of her mother's character, tells her, generally, how far she can go.

Mrs. Bellew only smiles now, with a kind of lofty indulgence, at her daughter's feeble attempt at wit, and Margaret, finding no harm is done, hastens to change the subject.

"There is no seeming, my dear mother, I assure you, in the interest I express in Mr. Perkins's gossip. I have invariably confessed to being one of the most inveterate gossips in the whole universe—especially I love being told everything about the people who have their dwelling places here, where our own lot has so strangely been cast, and where I devoutly hope we shall find a home. Our excellent landlord indulges me more than himself in the chit-chat you have such a contempt for."

"Well, every one to his taste, but I can't help thinking you are sacrificing a good deal of dignity, if not wasting some valuable time, in taking such an inordinate interest in a parcel of strangers. You had much better throw your heart into parish-work, as the rector asked you to do, and by this means get at once upon a high social standing place in the neighbourhood. There has

been no lady to assume the lead since the death of that Mrs. Fletcher of the Hall, though I think Mr. Spenser hinted that two or three were fighting for it. I am sure, Margaret, he intended giving you the option of securing it, which was a very flattering compliment to pay to a stranger just come into the neighbourhood. The rector is a single man, if not a very young one."

"And Mrs. Bellew could never be a match-maker if she tried ever so," laughs Margaret, interrupting (by a feigned misunderstanding) what she has reason to fear may grow into a serious argument and involve no end of earnest protestations and declarations on her own part. "Let the rector be, mother. He is a bachelor from the crown of his grizzled head to the soles of his very substantial feet. Let me be, too, please, as far as parish work is concerned. I like my fellow creatures passably well, but I never had a mission for either preaching to them when they are wicked, or coaxing them to swallow broth and jalap when they are sick. My energies and capabilities

(which, by the by, have had no call upon them as yet) seem to crave work and self-denial of a less hacknied kind. If I am ever to do anything worth remembering, it must be something that nobody else would think of undertaking. This has always been my secret ambition, and hence I am continually on the look out for my hitherto hidden pathway. Till I find it, mother, you must just bear with my idle, desultory ways, and not conspire with parish priests to get me into harness, which I should infallibly kick to shivers in the first week of having my back galled by it."

Mrs. Bellew, who has of course no shadow of sympathy with all this romantic nonsense, plies her needle more vigorously than ever while her daughter is talking. When Margaret has done, she looks up for one instant, and says, drily—

"Your poor father had a weak spot in his head!" and then goes on with her own occupation.

Margaret in the meanwhile plays with her implements of industry, and smiles softly and

dreamily to herself. One would almost conjecture that she had caught a glimpse of that hidden pathway she had been talking about, and that something in its aspect is attracting and pleasing her. However this may be, she soon shows signs of chafing again under the long, monotonous sitting still in one place, which is and has been from her earliest recollection, expected of her during the first two hours succeeding breakfast. Winter and summer, spring and autumn, in fair weather or foul, under circumstances of depression or elation, the rule has never varied, and the utmost concession she has been able to gain is an occasional substitution of drawing for needlework. This is much, considering that Mrs. Bellew was brought up to regard needlework as the primary duty of every woman's life, and throughout the whole of her own life has rigidly carried out the teaching of her girlhood.

But Margaret Bellew has been endowed with a nature that, however sweet and ductile under special influences, refuses absolutely to be bent and shaped according to

the pattern which her mother and her mother's mother would have desired ardently to force upon her. She can be obedient and yielding up to a certain point, and, as a lover of peace, and a woman of a quiet spirit, she has really done marvels in this way; but Mrs. Bellew has known, since her only child was ten years old, that it would be utterly useless, in Margaret's case, to draw the bow too tightly, and, like a sensible mother as she undoubtedly is, she accepts the situation, with a few secret regrets and misgivings as to her daughter's future, and makes the best of it.

When, at the end of another half-hour, the garden bell rings, and Margaret jumps up exultingly, exclaiming—

“Oh, there is my fellow-worker!” and rushes off with a snatch at a broad brimmed hat, and a pair of leather gloves laid ready beside her, to the sunny garden, Mrs. Bellew only indulges in a little jerky movement of her chin, and says to herself, as she folds complacently the last kitchen towel she has finished hemming,

“Just like her poor father! I always told him he would never lie still in his grave; and I don’t believe he would even now, if he could get out of it.”

CHAPTER VI.

A SCHEMING TAILOR.


Lest it should be supposed that Margaret's impatience to change the scene was the result of pure idleness, and that she did not do good, honest work, when she got into the garden, in spite of that enjoyment of Mr. Perkins's gossip to which she had so frankly confessed, let us look for a minute or two at the result of her own and her companion's labours of the last fortnight.

The tangled wilderness, the rank grass, the creeping, unsightly weeds, and the rough, stony pathways, have all disappeared. In their place, there is a smooth, green lawn, which fortunately takes in one fine old cedar tree, that has probably stood and thriven,

amidst the surrounding desolation, for above a century ; there are neatly gravelled and winding paths, in addition to one broad terrace under the front windows ; there are flower-beds of every shape and breadth, some of them already gay with heartseases, auriculas, and other early blossoming roots and plants ; there are glossy leaved shrubs, which promise maturity and beauty by-and-by ; and lastly, there is quite a little gem of a fernery in a sheltered spot, between the front and the back garden, which is Margaret's especial delight, and on behalf of which Mr. Perkins, either personally or by deputy, has ransacked the country, diving into obscure glens and quarries, and odd places of all kinds, in search of ferns and stones and mosses, for the construction and adornment of this innocent hobby of the young lady of Abbotsmead.

The whole of the ground at the back of the house has been left to the old gardener's management, and has developed into a very neat, serviceable kitchen garden, with some young fruit trees planted here and there,

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upon which Margaret looks with peculiar satisfaction, because she sees in them a hope of fixedness, a promise of rest after long and tiresome wanderings ; it being very certain that Mrs. Bellew would never have gone to the expense of buying currant and gooseberry bushes for any garden that she had not made up her mind was to remain, for a very considerable period, her own.

The orchard is at present untouched, but Margaret rather admires the wildness which is allowed to reign undisputed here. The paddock is to be let to any owner of cattle who may be disposed to pay a small annual sum for it. Mrs. Bellew has got the whole place on such remarkably easy terms, that she is willing to make but a small profit out of that portion of the land which is useless to herself.

And now I hope my reader has a tolerably clear notion of Abbotsmead, and can understand how it is that Margaret Bellew, whose whole grown up life has been spent in accompanying her mother from one part of England to another, from town to village,

and from village back to town again (the search being not for picturesqueness, or healthiness, or society, but for cheapness of living solely), should have come to feel a really tender affection for the place, and to desire earnestly that it may be a home to her—a home of rest and quietness, at least, if not of the birth of any fuller and sweeter life than she has hitherto known.

On the morning about which I am writing Margaret feels in unusually light and buoyant spirits, attributable, no doubt, to the sunny delicious atmosphere which has followed a long spell of cold easterly winds, and grey dismal skies.

Mr. Perkins, after his customary respectful greeting—the young lady of Abbotsmead is worthy of being an Empress in his eyes—cannot help complimenting her on her charming looks, and predicting that the air of Ditchley will suit her admirably. And Margaret, who is not above being gratified at the ex-tailor's laudatory speeches, because she knows that he thinks every word that he says, replies cheerfully that she knows

the air will suit her, and that she is fast growing to like Ditchley (spite of its ugliness) better than any place she has lived in yet.

Then they both set to work in downright earnest, and, for a good half-hour, plant and dig and rake with a zeal that, on the lady's part at least, can scarcely fail to exhaust itself by-and-by. Mr. Perkins is more amused than astonished when his companion abruptly throws down her trowel, changes her squatting posture for an erect one, and exclaims—

“Oh dear, my back is just broken! It is too warm for hard work to-day. I should enjoy now taking a basket and going off to those woods you have told me of, and hunting for violets and primroses. Don't tire yourself any more this morning, Mr. Perkins. Get a rest on the seat under the cedar, and I will go indoors, and fetch you a glass of ale.”

“I am not tired at all, Miss Margaret,” her fellow-worker protests, handling his spade more vigorously than ever, to confirm this assertion; “and I will have no ale to-

day, thank you. I was up at the Hall very early this morning, on business with Mr. Fletcher, and he would have me drink a glass of some old wine he thought I should fancy. I took the liberty of asking him if the young ladies were soon expected home, but he only shook his head, with one of those dismal sighs which are as natural to him, poor gentleman, as simple breathing to other people, and said in his quiet-like, uncomplaining way, 'Not yet I fancy, Perkins. It is gayer over there in France than it is here, and my daughters are attached to their aunt. I have never told them I wished them to return to me.' And bless you, Miss Margaret," concluded the suddenly energetic speaker, "he never will, though it's plain his heart is breaking over his loneliness."

Margaret does not say a word in reply to this interesting communication, but her face has assumed a look of intent attention, her eyes are full of a tender pity, and there is an unmistakable something in her whole aspect which suggests that this is by no means the first time she has had brought before her

notice the sorrows and the wrongs of poor David Fletcher. It is a subject indeed on which the worthy ex-tailor of Ditchley can always be eloquent. He has known the family for a great many years. He is a man of an observing as well as of a decidedly sentimental nature, and circumstances, which it is unnecessary to enter upon here, had, in days gone by, established an undying feud between himself and the late Mrs. Fletcher. Since the opening of the new cemetery he and David had been brought a good deal into contact, and though the gentleman, of the Hall could not ignore the social difference which must ever exist between one of his rank and a retired tailor, he had a sincere respect for his modest, unobtrusive, philanthropic fellow-townsmen, and invariably treated him with a consideration and an urbanity which had quite won Mr. Perkins's soft heart, and made him for ever and ever an enthusiastic friend and partizan of the almost friendless individual whose history I am telling.

Finding now that his listener has no re-

mark to offer, and at the same time being thoroughly satisfied as to her interest in the topic he has chosen, Mr. Perkins, leaning for a minute contemplatively on his spade, continues—


“It’s a bit of a mystery to me how Mr. Fletcher can care for going up so often by himself to that lonesome cemetery—not but what the cemetery is a sweet spot, viewed apart from its dumb company, and naturally I’m the last man likely to say a word in its disparagement—only it strikes me as odd that Mr. David Fletcher should be fond of haunting the place where the woman who led him such an awful life lies buried. I don’t know that he frequents her grave in particular, but I do know that he walks out constantly to the cemetery, and stays there for hours. He has walked out to it this morning.”

“A long walk,” Margaret suggests now, inferring that an observation of some kind is expected of her; “especially for a lame person. But I think you have told me that Mr. Fletcher does not suffer much, physi-

cally, from his lameness. He can probably do the same amount of walking as he would without this affliction."

"Well, he ought not, Miss Margaret," asserts Mr. Perkins, in a tone which conveys the idea of his possessing private information on the subject; "only, you see, he is that restless, poor gentleman! from living so much alone, and from having a hard and bitter past to look back upon, that when once he takes to walking (mostly, you know, he shuts himself up, like a hermit, in one dreary room), but when once he takes to walking, he never seems able to come to an anchor, and so, of course, he greatly overtaxes his strength. Now, to-day for instance——" here Mr. Perkins appears suddenly to grow a little embarrassed, and to halt somewhat in his usually fluent speech—"to-day, for instance, Miss Margaret, Mr. Fletcher told me he was intending to walk the whole way to that precious cemetery and back. Why, it must be four miles and a half, at the very least, from his place, and up hill all the last part of the road; but he

never will have out a carriage for himself, and riding on horseback, you see, would not be quite the thing for him. Well, when I heard what he was thinking of doing, I made so bold as to say I was coming here, and that my gig would fetch me at about one o'clock. I reckoned that he could be down as far as Abbotsmead by that hour, and I said I should feel honoured, as indeed I shall, if he would meet my humble conveyance, and allow me to drive him to the Hall. There is just one thing more I said, Miss Margaret, and I hope I shall not incur your displeasure for this. I told Mr. Fletcher that if he happened to be here before the gig, I might perhaps get leave from you to show him the improvements in the grounds and the outside of Abbotsmead. He knew the old crazy house well, and would be vastly interested in seeing what we have made of it. It was a very great liberty to take, I am aware," concludes the modest landlord, actually growing quite purple under the excitement of his confession; "but you are so good and kind, Miss Margaret, and



poor Mr. Fletcher is the quietest, saddest, least-presuming gentleman in the whole world."

Worthy Mr. Perkins! He might have saved himself a considerable degree of emotion, and have been content with a much simpler apology to his esteemed Miss Margaret if he had only known.

Known what as yet she scarcely knew herself—that to have an opportunity of speaking a kind word to David Fletcher, of convincing him that there was at least one woman in the universe whom his misfortunes had inspired with the deepest interest, to whom his person could never be repulsive, and who admired enthusiastically all she had heard and imagined of his character, would be a happiness she had scarcely dared to calculate upon obtaining, the realization of the only positively romantic dream that had ever been admitted into her essentially matter-of-fact and practical life.

But, of course, innocent Mr. Perkins (though a bit of a dreamer, and a larger bit of a schemer, sometimes, himself) is not supposed

to understand anything of the mysterious workings of a young lady's heart—therefore he is delightfully relieved when Margaret Bellew replies, simply and quietly, to his risky communication.

“You have done nothing wrong, Mr. Perkins, I assure you. Only I am afraid I must exact your keeping strictly to the limitations you have named. I mean that, without due preparation, I could not venture to ask Mr. Fletcher, or any stranger *inside* the house. It sounds frightfully inhospitable, but I am not mistress here, as you know; and my mother would strongly object to be taken unawares.”

For a moment Margaret pauses here, totally unable to resist seeing for that brief space of time a vision, half amusing, and half awe-striking, of Mrs. Bellew abruptly intruded upon at uncanonical hours, and in her morning *déshabille*, by a stranger of the male sex, and one who, having no lady to bring with him, she would deem without the shadow of an excuse for his visit.


But the daughter has no intention of

foregoing her own eagerly longed for enjoyment because the mother contemplates the whole of life through one excessively narrow window, so she warmly seconds Mr. Perkins when that now triumphant individual suggests that he had better look up the road to see if Mr. Fletcher is coming. And when, in the course of a few more expectant minutes, David Fletcher, very worn and tired, does arrive upon the scene, the young lady of Abbotsmead, introduced by their mutual friend Mr. Perkins, gives him a welcome so full of womanly sweetness, gentleness, and cordiality, that the sorrow-stricken man, all unused to manifestations of this nature towards himself, may well be excused if for a little while, he thinks the world must have turned round with him, and brought him abruptly into a region where the sun still shines, and fair flowers of paradise have not quite ceased to bloom.

CHAPTER VII.

RESTING UNDER THE CEDAR.

MR. PERKINS, though a very plain simple man, and possessed of no larger amount of education than usually falls to the lot of country tradespeople, proved quite equal to the occasion which he had himself (no doubt with the best intentions) evoked. He did the honours of Abbotsmead—all of it, at least, that might be seen without intruding upon the unconscious dragoness indoors—with such an interesting humility, mingled with such an evidently keen enjoyment of his task, that Margaret was secretly amused in watching him, and though she walked on one side of Mr. Fletcher during his leisurely progress through the not very extensive



grounds, she would not in any way interfere with the explanations and the modest speechifyings in which the landlord of the place was indulging, on behalf of his esteemed neighbour from the Hall.

Whenever this gentleman addressed her,—as of course he did pretty frequently after her very sweet and gracious reception of him—she replied with interest and animation; but Margaret Bellew was not essentially a talking woman, and on the present occasion she wanted to take quiet observations of the man whose past history and present loneliness had made upon her mind a perhaps singularly deep impression.

But the ex-tailor of Ditchley, while really exulting in an opportunity of exhibiting a portion of his recently acquired property to a gentleman of Mr. David Fletcher's rank, and one, too, whom personally he so highly honoured, was far from intending that all the magnanimity should be on the side of the young lady, without whose good nature and condescension he could not have had his excusable little pride gratified. So,

when Mr. Fletcher had duly admired and wondered over the magical transformation which had been wrought in every direction, when he had especially extolled Margaret's choice fernery, and enlightened both her and her zealous purveyor as to the names of many of the specimens they had collected hap-hazard, Mr. Perkins suddenly remembered that the new comer had walked a long distance and must be very tired. Might he suggest a brief rest on the seat under the cedar, while he himself took a turn down the road, just to see if the gig, already overdue, was near at hand?

Poor David who, at that moment, could conceive of no rarer pleasure than to sit under a cool cedar tree, with all the airs of spring breathing softly around him, and with the sweet woman who had literally shone upon his dark pathway as a sudden "phantom of delight" beside him, turned to Margaret, as Mr. Perkins spoke, with a look of quite touching appeal in his care-lined but striking face.

"Oh, do," she said, eagerly and impul-

sively, in answer to the look, while, unknown to herself, but not unobserved by one at least of her companions, a very pretty rosy colour tinted her usually pale cheeks. "I cannot ask you to rest in-doors to-day, because my mother is scarcely prepared yet to receive company; but it is much nicer under the cedar, and I shall be so happy to bring you a glass of wine, while you are waiting for Mr. Perkins's carriage."

All this very fast and a little nervously, for Margaret was feeling sensitively the inhospitality, as she deemed it, which Mrs. Bellew's peculiarities forced upon her, and was vexing her kind spirit with conjectures as to what Mr. Fletcher *must* think of not being invited into the house, whereas he, all the while, poor man, was only basking contentedly, and with a strange sense of some new condition of things which would quickly pass away, in her gracious presence, and wishing, with a very passion of desire, that time would stand still on his behalf, till he had grown familiar with this most exceptional and exciting state of enjoyment.

"I shall infinitely prefer the seat under the tree," he said, smiling faintly, as he guessed at what was troubling her, and wondered that she did not see, instinctively, that she herself was all he cared for at Abbotsmead. "On a day like this, the outer air is far too great a luxury to be foregone without more self-denial than I should care to practise. But I hope you intend to stay with me while I am waiting for our good friend's carriage, Miss Bellew."

Of course Margaret intended it, and, with a frank expression of satisfaction at Mr. Fletcher's desire for her companionship, and a something in those very tender eyes of her's which more than confirmed her simply courteous words, she led the way to the bench under the old tree, and sat down, with a fluttering heart, beside the poor deformed unhappy man, whom to cheer and gladden had come to be (through some strange freak in this woman's nature) one of the strongest desires of her life.


They talked, in the beginning, of general and indifferent things, as persons must do

newly introduced to each other ; but it was soon evident to Margaret that her companion's stock of merely conventional, every-day phrases, which, in ordinary society, represent the whole of conversation, was very small indeed ; while David Fletcher, on his side, made the discovery that the young lady of Abbotsmead had enough originality and independence to care nothing for the flimsy barriers which etiquette stupidly sets up to forbid people of opposite sexes learning more of each other than can be read on the extreme surface.

After this mutual revelation, they drifted into friendliness with surprising rapidity, David speaking unreservedly of his loneliness, of the aimlessness of his life, and of that ever growing sense of having nothing to do and nothing to enjoy, in a busy, enjoying world, which caused him to long for the quiet rest of the grave, and drove him to the gloom of an isolated cemetery to nurse his morbid imaginings, rather than to the society of his fellow-men, where he might have got rid of some, at least, of the evil

shadows that haunted him. He had understood thus much of himself always, but half an hour spent in the society of Margaret Bellew had revealed a vast deal more to him, had taught him that human sympathy was not only a real and very precious thing, but just the medicine his sick soul at present needed, had convinced him, too, that here was the one being in the whole universe who could sympathize with him, if he were ungenerous enough to introduce into her bright untroubled life the gloomy sorrows of his own.

Looking at Margaret Bellew that April morning, anybody would have judged her life to be bright and untroubled, for she was conscious of a spring of happiness deep down in her heart, which could not fail to be reflected partially in her outward aspect; but besides this, she had told David Fletcher how quietly and uneventfully all the days of her life had hitherto been passed; and he thought he could read enough of that pure and sweet nature to understand that the absence of external trials would imply, in her case, a



succession of golden hours of hope and gladness.

Whether this were so to the extent he believed or not, his judgment and his better feelings warned him that he had no right to clutch too eagerly and readily at all that this tender-hearted, unworldly woman might be disposed to give, to take selfishly the sweet intoxicating draught which her full and unreserved sympathy would be to him, when he had nothing to offer in return that could be esteemed as an equivalent by any woman breathing, when the libation of his whole soul at the least attractive woman's feet would only provoke a compassionate glance of surprise, or perhaps, from one like this sweet Margaret, a tender regret that he had suffered his feelings so cruelly to mislead him concerning the width of the gulf dividing him for ever from the crowning bliss of life.

So David Fletcher, thoroughly conscientious in these sentiments and convictions on that first occasion of his meeting Margaret Bellew, resolved valiantly to put a check upon himself, when he saw that the most

general mention of his sorrows brought the tender light into her eyes, the softest tones into her voice, and a nameless something into her whole manner, which, while it was dangerously seductive to himself, suggested infinite capabilities in her nature for that largeness and fulness of sympathy which cannot exist without entailing upon its possessor a corresponding capacity for suffering.

Poor David had heard and read of such women, but he had never believed in their existence till now—still less had he believed that it would be his lot to encounter one of them, or that encountering her, he should feel it right to forego the intense sweetness she could infuse into his clouded life.

But now, if he were to talk to Margaret of his wretched marriage, of the cruelties and injustices he had endured from the woman lying under the cypresses on the hill, if he were to expatiate on his love for his daughters, and on their total want of affection for himself, if he were to bid her follow him, in imagination, to his solitary home, and view him sitting or wandering there in patient

sadness, day after day, would not the gain to him—the rare, delicious gain—be more than overbalanced by the loss to her? Was it not certain that she would throw her whole woman's heart into his passionate story, and waste worlds of tender emotion over the sorrows of a man whose misfortunes alone gave him, or could ever give him, a claim upon her interest.

Such being the case, it was manifestly his part to deny himself the sweet solace which even the friendship of such a woman would have been—it was clearly his duty to forbear welcoming to his more than tired heart the rest and the peace and the gladness which he saw that this stranger had it, both in her power and in her will, lavishly to bestow.

It took David Fletcher less time to think out these thoughts than the chronicling of them here has taken. Thinking was his chief employment always, and of late days he had had opportunity enough, poor man, to exercise himself in it to perfection. He had been talking to Margaret all the while his mind had been so busy, asking her, with

the friendliest interest, concerning her tastes, her pursuits, the extent of her acquaintance with the new neighbourhood she had come to live in, and various other matters that had no immediate reference to himself or his own troubles.

But though Margaret followed cheerfully wherever her companion led, he could not be blind to the fact that she did not care half so much for being questioned about herself as for listening to any revelations he chose to make on the subject of his past or present life, the extreme sadness of the atmosphere surrounding him appearing to have some extraordinary and incomprehensible charm for this sunny-tempered woman.

Once he said to her—

“You would make an egotist of almost any man, Miss Bellew—certainly of any man whose heart was overcharged with bitter memories. The temptation of exciting the interest you are so generously ready to give, is almost beyond human strength to resist. Such women as you need be rare, for they are dangerous.”

"I don't believe they are rare," Margaret replied ; "and I don't see why they should be dangerous. If sympathy can be of the very least help or comfort, why should it not be accepted as freely as it is offered?"

"I could give you more than one good reason," he said, with a gravity which convinced her he had reflected on the subject ; "but I won't give you any just now. You have made the acquaintance of our rector, I believe? How do you like him?"

Margaret had no inclination to discuss the rector. She said she had only seen him twice. He appeared to her rather a studious than a practical or deeply religious man. He was however very agreeable and gentlemanly, and seemed anxious that his parish should be well attended to.

"Yes," answered Mr. Fletcher, smiling with some genuine amusement now ; "Mr. Spenser likes his curates and the ladies of Ditchley to work. He thinks parish drudgery good for everybody except himself. He told me about you, Miss Bellew, and hinted that you might be very useful here if only

he could induce you to put your shoulder to the wheel."

"That I shall never do in the way Mr. Spenser wishes," announced Margaret, as decidedly as she had spoken to her mother on the same subject. "In my nature there is a necessity for liking thoroughly whatever work I undertake; and parish work I should not like at all. The rector will have to look elsewhere if more labourers are needed in his vineyard."

"Yet you could never be a drone or an idler, Miss Bellew, in the great human hive. Forgive me, if I venture to read as much of your character as is written in your face, and speaks in every tone of your voice. I mean that your marvellous capacities for sympathy will always be taking you out of yourself, and constraining you to do or suffer something for others."

"It may be so," said Margaret gently; "but those others must be of my own choosing. I have not discovered my definite work yet, Mr. Fletcher. When I do" (her voice dropped here and trembled

through her earnestness), "I will ask God to give me strength to perform it faithfully."

David Fletcher looked at her as she sat with her head a little bent beside him. He thought of Wordsworth's exquisite description of the woman who afterwards became his wife ; he thought of a whole company of the good true women of history ; he thought of his own mother, as he had known her for a few brief years of his early childhood, and as she sometimes came to him now in dreams. But this Margaret appeared to him fairer, sweeter, nobler than them all ; and his heart uttered a very great and bitter cry at the reflection that though she was to be won, *he* might never win her.

Forgetting to answer her last observation, forgetting everything but that he had been shown the gates of paradise only to be driven back from them for ever, David rose abruptly and said he heard the sound of wheels.

Standing up immediately too, Margaret, with a sudden fear that, unless she did something to hinder it, this might be their last,

as it was their first, meeting in friendly intercourse, exclaimed with earnestness—

“ You will come and see my mother, Mr. Fletcher, when we are a little more settled, and give her an opportunity, I hope, of atoning for the inhospitality of your reception to-day. I am really dreadfully ashamed when I think of it.”

“ *Have* I been inhospitably received, Miss Bellew?” replied David, with a smile that Margaret felt it would be worth a kingdom to have the power of bringing constantly to that sad face. “ I did not think so. I have been very happy under this tree, too happy to have either the power or the will to decline your invitation to come again if your mother will receive me. When may I venture to come ?”

Poor David ! He had yielded, you see, to the very first temptation that Margaret innocently put in his way. He meant to be very good and very self-denying, but of course there were limits to every man’s capabilities, and what excuse could he offer to this gracious young lady for avoiding her

society, when she herself urged him, with the most friendly earnestness, to become a visitor at her mother's house ?

"My mother is nearly always at home and disengaged in the afternoons," said Margaret, as Mr. Perkins bustled in at the garden gate, and advanced towards the standing pair ; "and whenever you walk to the cemetery you must come in, as you have done this morning, and rest here."

She spoke out of the fulness of her kind, pitying spirit, and certainly with a very fever of longing to become a helper and a consoler to this solitary and unhappy widower ; but Margaret Bellew's own nature was rather tender and intense than passionate, and she could have no idea of the effect of her friendly words upon the man in whose crushed heart there existed still a hidden volcano.

He knew that his hand shook visibly as he stretched it out in bidding farewell to her, while Margaret, noticing how very pale he had grown, reproached herself for not having insisted on fetching him the wine he

had refused. But the brief parting words were over in a moment; the garden gate had closed upon the two men, the wheels of Mr. Perkins's gig were making a noisy rattling along the somewhat stony road; and the young lady of Abbotsmead was standing musingly under the spreading cedar tree, alone.

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Bellew, when a few minutes later Margaret, too perfectly trained ever to forget what o'clock it was in her mother's house, entered the dining-room she had left more than two hours ago.

"Well! I do hope you have had enough of garden work for one day. Why, I have finished hemming my whole heap of towels, and have cut out half a dozen new pillow cases while you have been out there with that man. I suppose he brought you a fine budget of gossip from Ditchley this morning?"

Then Margaret, sitting down during the process of her companion's folding and arranging all the heavy work she had been employed upon since eight o'clock, related,

in as simple a manner as possible, what had actually occurred in the garden, not even concealing that she had asked Mr. Fletcher to come again soon and be introduced to Mrs. Bellew, and that he had promised eagerly to do so.

"You might have spared yourself the trouble, for any pleasure the man's visit will give *me*," was the somewhat ungracious comment, after a due amount of surprise and scanty approval of the whole occurrence had been indulged in. "I am not at all prepossessed by what I have heard of your new friend, and, though it may be wrong, I can't help having a shrinking, a sort of creepy crawly feeling, from all deformed people."

Margaret had scarcely remembered that David Fletcher *was* deformed ; but her heart only throbbed with a deeper pity and tenderness for him as her mother thus coldly alluded to his affliction. She said nothing more now, however, and Mrs. Bellew soon recovered her good temper under the conviction that she had got through a larger amount of needlework than usual this

morning, and that, to whatever extent other people had wasted their time, nothing had occurred to disturb the admirable routine of her own domestic arrangements.

CHAPTER VIII.

DAVID IN THE CLOUDS.

"A VERY sweet and affable young lady, sir, is my new tenant," abruptly exclaimed Mr. Perkins, tired apparently of the dead silence in which he and his companion had been hitherto wrapped, as they drove quickly along the sunny high road in the direction of Ditchley.

And David Fletcher, who had been drawn up by invisible agency into some radiant cloud-land, and had wholly forgotten where he was, and what prosaic mortal was seated beside him, alighted with a hard struggle upon the cold earth at the unwelcome sound of a human voice, and looked round at the speaker dreamily for a minute, before replying to his observation.

At length he said—

“I am obliged to you, Perkins, for showing me your very charming Abbotsmead to-day. I quite enjoyed my little rest in the garden. That cedar-tree must be a good age. Have you any notion how long it has stood there?”

I need scarcely confide to my intelligent reader that David Fletcher was not in the smallest degree interested in the antiquity of the Abbotsmead cedar, though he loved the tree, and would do so to his life's end—but not to gain a kingdom, not, it may even be, to gain Margaret herself, could he have been brought, in the state of mind he then was, to discuss the merits of the woman he had just left, with the ex-tailor of Ditchley.

Of course, Mr. Perkins, having no key to such transcendental feelings, could not in the least understand why his companion should ask questions about a foolish tree, when he had invited him to speak of a most bewitching young lady. He was disposed to fear that Mr. Fletcher had not liked Miss Bellew, and yet they had seemed to part

with friendliness and cordiality. The worthy landlord dived into the recesses of his intellect to seek for a solution of the puzzle, but he only floundered hopelessly in the mist that had gathered round him, and blundered still more hopelessly in trying to get out of it.

“I am afraid, sir,” he said, “I can tell you nothing about the cedar-tree, which was doubtless a veteran before either you or I came into the world—but as regards Miss Margaret, I can confidently affirm that she is a real lady, in spite of her condescension and affability with a plain man like myself—and should you come to know her better, sir, I am morally certain that you will think as highly of her as I do. The mother I can’t say a great deal about, having seen scarce anything of her. She may be a lady, too, though I fancy she has queer ways with her, and is uncommonly fond of her money—but the daughter I’d back against any princess in the land; and to my taste she’s beautiful to look at, in spite of being not

altogether so tall and fine a figure as is the case with handsome women generally."

Poor David ! How he writhed under the torture his excellent neighbour was, so very innocently, inflicting on him ! How he wished the steady old horse they were sitting behind would shy, or kick, or do any other exceptional thing to compel the driver's attention. How he longed for courage to tell his chattering companion to be silent, or to talk of what was less far above him than the stars of heaven, something that his common human touch could not sully or profane ! Of course all this was exceedingly ridiculous, and proved David Fletcher to be a very ultra-sensitive, romantic, unpractical sort of man. I cannot defend him, or assert that it was otherwise. If it had been, his whole life, past, present, and future, would have been different, and his history, which it is hoped may instruct some and interest others, need never have been written at all.

As a reply to Mr. Perkins' last suggestive and comprehensive remarks appeared absolutely necessary, that gentleman having

turned blandly to his companion, with his head a little on one side, when he had finished speaking, David compelled himself to say—

“At any rate, Perkins, you have been remarkably fortunate in getting your house let to two quiet gentlewomen, instead of to people with a large family of destructive children. I have seen both these ladies at church, you know, and I am quite disposed to agree in the high opinion you have formed of them. I will wish you good morning now, Perkins, with many thanks for the welcome lift you have given me. I shall prefer walking the remainder of the way; and here we are at your own door.

Quite in vain, good-natured Mr. Perkins entreated to be allowed the honour of driving Mr. Fletcher to the Hall. He had nothing in the world to do, and should be only too happy. David was firm as a rock on the point. He had been sitting so long now, he liked sauntering through the shady lanes: he was glad to lengthen out the time away from his solitary home; in short, he had a

dozen reasons to give for parting abruptly from the amiable ex-tailor, who would have gone to the uttermost ends of the earth to do him a service, but whose courtesy and devotedness could not, in David's estimation, be weighed for a single instant against one sweet intoxicating dream of Margaret.

So this poor foolish dreamer walked home alone, through the green budding hawthorn lanes, feeding upon honey-dew and nectar of the rarest flavour for the first half of his journey, and for the latter part awaking to the mournful consciousness that he was worse than a fool for bidding his hungry soul to such a shadowy banquet.

Then the old unrest and yearning and complaining came upon him with tenfold force, and he entered his dreary prison at last, cursing, like Job, the hour when it had been said of him, "a man-child is born into the world!"

A letter from Paris lay waiting for him upon his study table. These periodical elegantly written letters from Elizabeth were always more or less a trial to her father.

They were so stiff, so conventional, so totally wanting in any of that careless ease which children naturally indulge in, when writing to parents they love and feel at home with, that poor loving David could get no comfort of any kind out of them. He opened the present flimsy envelope with one of his dreary sighs, confident that he should be greeted with nothing more exhilarating than the usual stereotyped phrases, which might include a categorical list of the sights his daughter had seen since the last letter, and a few sisterly observations upon Amy's satisfactory progress in the Gallic tongue.

Something of this sort did, in point of fact, fill the first half-sheet of Elizabeth Fletcher's very highly glazed foreign paper, but the real gist of the matter came afterwards, and it was with a curious mingling of surprise and dismay that David read the following :—

“I proceed now, having told you all the news about ourselves, to give you a message with which dear Aunt Isabel has charged me. It seems that our cousin Rhoda, who,

you are aware, declined accompanying us to Paris, has been very unwell during the past winter. Her mamma has no doubt that she has either overworked herself, or poisoned her blood by malaria, or done some other rash and imprudent thing amongst the low people she persists in visiting in their wretched homes. Anyhow, Rhoda is ill enough to be ordered change of air and perfect quiet, till she has regained her strength, and it has occurred to Aunt Meredith that, as you are alone, and the Hall is healthily situated, you might like to ask your niece to come to Ditchley on a visit. She would bring her own little maid with her, so that the servants would have no extra trouble to speak of, even should she require nursing, which is unlikely, as the change is quite sure to set her up. I am to mention that nothing of this plan has been named to Rhoda as yet, and she is waiting in London to know what her mamma wishes her to do. Of course, I have told aunt that I did not for a moment doubt your willingness to invite Rhoda, but she is too scrupulous to

take any positive steps in the matter till she has had your answer to this letter. I may add that your not knowing our cousin will signify little to either of you, as she is, though so young, a person of complete self-possession, and far too wrapped up in her own views and schemes to require being amused, or even noticed, by those around her.

“ Please to write immediately, as dear Aunt Isabel is the most excitable and anxious woman in the world, and her nerves have been upset lately by the most unexpected arrival of her son in Paris. As I fancy you have been prejudiced against Herbert Meredith, I will only say that we scarcely see anything of him, the set he is in being the very gayest and most brilliant in all Paris, and poor aunt being, even yet, not equal to a great deal of visiting or receiving. I expect we shall be returning to England before the summer is over. Amy unites with me in love.

“ Your dutiful daughter,

“ ELIZABETH FLETCHER.”

Now it is one thing to dislike an utterly lonely life, and to have a natural craving for the companionship of those nearest and dearest to us, and quite another thing to have the society of total strangers thrust upon us without so much as our wishes being consulted in the matter, or time allowed us for growing reconciled to the idea of the novel position into which we are to be brought.

David Fletcher's instincts were essentially hospitable, social, and kindly; but, during his wife's tyrannical reign at the Hall, he had scarcely ever had an opportunity of bringing them into use. Mrs. Fletcher would have no company but of her own choosing, and as nearly everybody not personally related to her shrank from the hard, imperious, selfish woman, a guest in that unhappy home was a thing of the very rarest occurrence, even the favourite sister, Isabel, (Mrs. Meredith) only coming when no other country house opened its doors to receive her, and always, when she came, staying as short a time as possible.

David did not like Mrs. Meredith. She was certainly less haughty and imperious than his wife, but she was frivolous, weak, and vain, with just enough cleverness to make her dangerous to those who might be brought in any way under her influence. The father's conscience had reproached him again and again for suffering his daughters to stay so long with their aunt; but David Fletcher was as proud as well as a sensitive man, and he could not endure the thought of compelling his unloving girls to return to him. Hitherto it had been only the frivolity and lightness of the aunt which had troubled him, when he dwelt upon the association, but Elizabeth's letter of to-day had suggested a new and more serious apprehension, and one that David would be sure to recur to as soon as his mind was at leisure from that other vexatious matter which called for his immediate attention and action.

Of course Rhoda must come. Never for one moment did it occur to the lonely master of the Hall that he could escape the duty so coolly forced upon him. And from what

his daughter had told him, casually, in her letters of this girl he was rather inclined to think well of her than otherwise. At any rate, she was neither fast, like the brother he had heard so much ill of, nor even worldly, like the mother he personally despised. She might be severe, and harsh, and puritanical, as Elizabeth had hinted, but these were faults which would affect herself more than those around her; and at all events, David did not think that they would greatly affect him, especially in the presence of that new and absorbing interest which had come into his life during the half hour he had spent that morning under the old cedar tree.

For all this, however, he did not want his niece; he resented having her thrust upon him. He was a shy man, and this Rhoda's utmost self-possession could not make him a bold or a confident one. He had no notion either, how to provide for the comfort and entertainment of a young woman beneath his, at present, bachelor roof. The details must be left to the housekeeper, who was, luckily, an intelligent body, and not more

opiniated and self-willed than housekeepers without mistresses usually are; but, of course, David must have his guest with him every day: they must breakfast, lunch, dine and sup together; he must take her for walks and drives; he must support her if the ladies of Ditchley called upon her; he must accompany her in returning their visits; he must, in short, come out of the dreary shell which had grown so familiar to him, and which, in spite of its dreariness, he preferred to publicity, and show himself openly and constantly amongst the fellow creatures he shrank from, and whom he believed shrank equally from him.

It was not a pleasant prospect by any means, and the one indemnifying fact in connection with it, namely, that it might be an important aid in promoting his intercourse with the tenants of Abbotsmead, had not yet shaped itself with sufficient clearness in David's mind to mitigate the primary annoyance to any great extent. He liked to think of Margaret as a being apart and distinct from all other women. He could

not picture her as one amongst a group, large or small, of common place and inferior girls. That quaint old shady garden in which he had seen and talked with her was just the sort of surrounding that harmonized with his exalted conception of her. He shrank from the idea of having this pure delightful vision disturbed by the intrusion of less romantic elements. Rhoda Meredith was sure to be an unromantic element. She would be chattering to Margaret of paupers, and coal tickets, and flannel petticoats, and all kinds of utilitarian matters, and those soft tender eyes (which had evidently found their way down into the very depths of poor David's susceptible heart) would have to waste their blinding sweetness on a momentary pity inspired by such themes as these, instead of turning all his night into day, by just shedding their blessed light upon him and his sorrows, as they had done this morning.


But even though Margaret Bellew should never look in kindly sympathy upon him again, or though the heavens and the earth

should abruptly collapse, Rhoda Meredith must come as a guest to Ditchley. David Fletcher was so fully alive to this fact that, in the very midst of his rebelling against it, and vexing his soul with a thousand imaginings in reference to the discomfort it might entail, he sat down, with the air of a martyr who is patiently accepting his doom, and wrote to tell Elizabeth that he should be prepared to receive her cousin that day week.

CHAPTER IX.

DAVID AND HIS PASTOR.

DAVID FLETCHER went to church on the following Sunday, and saw nothing but Margaret all the time he was there. The Hall pew was raised just a little above the pews destined for the general congregation, and as it had also thick crimson curtains which were usually drawn on three of its sides, the occupant had every facility for gazing down at his neighbours, if he were so disposed, without much fear of his wrong doing being detected. As a rule, David Fletcher was absorbed and attentive in church, scarcely bestowing a passing glance on any of his fellow worshippers, but to-day he could not have told how the prayers were



read, even if he knew which of the two curates read them ; nor was he, in the smallest degree, edified by the rector's brief and rapidly delivered sermon, though he had a vague idea that it was rather more flowery and poetical than usual.

Mr. Spenser did not favour his congregation by preaching to them very often. Why else should he go to the expense of two curates ?—and on the rare occasions of his appearing in the pulpit, his hearers expected nothing beyond a short, dry, scholarly discourse, which not one in a hundred understood, and out of which not one in a thousand could have got a crumb of spiritual nourishment. But on this particular Sunday, everybody who had listened to the sermon remarked afterwards that it was quite different from any Mr. Spenser had ever given them before, not only much more plain and practical (by the by, is it not a curious thing that the people who are the least addicted to the practice of godliness are the first to extol what they call ‘ practical sermons ? ’)—not only much more plain

and practical, but expressed in such elegant language, having such choice bits of quotation from the sacred poets, and so very nice altogether.

Now David had not, it must be acknowledged, listened with sufficient attention to take in the whole of these interesting facts in reference to his pastor's present discourse ; but, as I have said, he had a vague notion that it was an exceptionally light and flowery one, and he choose to think that it had been composed and delivered with the special and sole object of pleasing Margaret Bellew—a most reprehensible proceeding on the part of a clergyman, who ought to be equally interested in every member of his flock, and who certainly forgot his duty in preaching attractive and poetical little sermons for the delectation of one who was as yet but a stranger in their midst.

This was bad enough, and David Fletcher considered that he had every right to feel virtuously indignant with his spiritual guide, as he watched Margaret's steadfast, upturned face, and believed that she was drinking in


eagerly every word to which her outward ears were listening. But matters assumed a far worse aspect when David, waiting patiently behind a tall monument in the churchyard, for an opportunity of greeting Miss Bellew as she went out, and perhaps of being introduced to her mother, saw, from his post of observation, that Mr. Spenser had joined the ladies from Abbotsmead in the porch, and was probably intending to walk home with them.

Of course he had the option of coming forward still, and of making one of the walking party—a less sensitive man would have done so at once, and trusted to his wit and skill for securing the daughter as his own companion. But poor David was of far too shrinking a nature, and had far too humble an opinion of himself to do anything of the kind. The rector was a handsome looking man, in the prime of life, and even had his worldly position been less assured than it was (in point of fact, Mr. Spenser was of as good birth, and had nearly as large an income, as the master of the Hall), this

unfortunate gentleman, deformed in person, and encompassed with all the dark shadows of his past life, would never have dreamt of entering the lists for any lady's favour with his well-to-do and happier circumstanced bachelor neighbour.

So David walked slowly and dejectedly back to his solitary home, without having exchanged a word with a single living creature. He stayed behind the high tombstone till all the congregation had dispersed, and then he started on his lonely way, wondering if the whole world contained so miserable a being as himself, while his active imagination pictured the social, happy trio, whom he was following, in torturing meditation, all along the sunny road to Abbotsmead.

The remainder of the day he spent shut up in his dreary study, deciding that he would think no more of Margaret, that he would go no more to Abbotsmead, that he would just give the reins to an evidently malignant fate to do its worst with him, praying only (though he doubted, poor man! whether his prayers were ever heard) that



the hour of his deliverance might come before the darkness of his life grew too dense far him to grope his way through it.

Tuesday of that week was the day fixed for Rhoda Meredith's arrival. Mrs. Meredith had herself written a few hurried lines to thank Mr. Fletcher for his great goodness in offering to receive her poor dear girl ; and David, though still dreading the infliction of a guest and a stranger, had made up his mind to it as to an inevitable necessity, and was occupied during the whole of Monday (in spite of his continued and unalterable sadness) in devising plans for his young niece's comfort and entertainment.

Late in the afternoon he was surprised, and not agreeably, by a call from Mr. Spenser. That gentleman was not by any means addicted to parochial visiting, and he and David Fletcher had never been on terms of special intimacy, perhaps owing to the fact that the late lady of the Hall (who approved of the orthodox clergy, especially of the well-born and wealthy amongst them) had always claimed the rector of Ditchley

as her own particular friend, and, in consequence of the prominent part it was her pleasure to take in parish matters, had, in truth, come a good deal in contact with him.

Since her death, the two gentlemen had not drawn nearer together, though when they met accidentally, or, on rare occasions, called on each other, there was a very fair amount of cordiality and friendliness of manner between them.

But David, as I have explained, was not just now feeling quite that respect and veneration for his pastor which would have made an interview agreeable to him ; therefore, when the Reverend Mr. Spenser was announced, in a sonorous voice, by the old butler, about half-an-hour before dinner time, the master of the Hall was conscious of a slight internal shudder, accompanied by a fleeting curiosity as to what the late and impromptu visit really meant.

Apparently it only meant the desire to talk to an appreciative audience of the new comers into the neighbourhood, of the two

ladies who had chosen Ditchley as their place of residence, and who were likely—one of them at least—to be so great an acquisition to the extremely limited society of the place. Mr. Spenser thought it such a pity that the young ladies of the Hall were not at home. They would, of course, have been delighted to show Miss Bellew some attention, and their notice would have been pleasing and acceptable both to her and to her mother. The Ditchley families were all slow and heavy, and even when they decided upon calling at Abbotsmead there was nothing in any of them to interest a lively intelligent person like Miss Bellew, who, while giving every evidence in her conversation of knowing the world, and being fitted to shine in the best society, had yet retained all the charming simplicity of girlhood, with far more of originality than one girl in ten thousand could boast.

Mr. Fletcher had listened, with very grave and quiet courtesy, to everything his pastor had to say. He had avoided interrupting him by a single remark of his own. Possibly

it would not have been easier or more agreeable to him to discuss the merits of Margaret Bellew with the refined and cultivated Mr. Spenser, than it was with the plain and uneducated Thomas Perkins. But when the enthusiastic clergyman paused at length, and seemed expecting an observation of some kind, David, fighting with his inward repugnance, said with a half smile—

“Your admiration of your new parishioner suggests your having made the most of the short time she has been here in improving her acquaintance. You have been frequently to Abbotsmead, I presume?”

“No indeed,” replied the bachelor-rector, coughing, and even, David fancied, blushing a little at this plain question; “I have only called on the ladies twice, and yesterday I had the honour of walking part of the way home with them; but Miss Bellew has such frank winning manners, that one seems to know her intimately after the first half-hour spent in her society. I like the mother too. She is peculiar, no doubt, and there is a brusquerie about her that might repel some,

but to me she is amazingly gracious and affable. By-the-by, you, too, have made the daughter's acquaintance, have you not?"

It was David's turn to change colour now, and to feel his heart giving most inconvenient thumps against his side; but he managed to answer, with tolerable outward calmness, that he had done so, and that he agreed in all Mr. Spenser had said in reference to the young lady's attractions.

"I am glad of it, very glad," asserted the Rector warmly (how could he fear a rival in one like poor David?); "because it will the more incline you to co-operate with me in a little plan I have in my head. It is unfortunate that your daughters are not at home; but you are expecting a niece, I understand, and she will answer our purpose nearly as well. It is just this. Miss Bellew was speaking yesterday of the Dunross woods, and expressing a great wish to go to them. Somebody has been telling her of the wild flowers and ferns that are to be found there, and, woman-like, she is impatient to visit the spot and collect for herself.

Now, you know I have no carriage, and even if Miss Bellew were disposed to accompany me on horseback, I could not suggest such a mode of arriving at the woods to the old lady. But it has occurred to me that, when you have called on the latter with your niece, you might be tempted to offer them one of the Hall carriages for the expedition, or, better still, to propose accompanying them with the young lady who is coming to stay with you. We might make up a nice little party in this way, as your large open carriage will hold four—the three ladies and yourself—then I could ride beside you, and, for a third gentleman, I would ask my junior curate, and lend him a horse for the occasion. Mr. Jones eschews all the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, so it would be no use giving the chance to him ; but Mr. Palmer will be delighted, and there will be a beau for each lady when we take to exploring the woods. What say you to my notion ? Have I been too presumptuous in reckoning upon your neighbourly help in the matter ?”

Now, David Fletcher was never better pleased than when an opportunity came in his way of doing a kindness of any sort to his neighbours and acquaintances. Few amongst them ever asked a favour of him, because of his reserve, and the very hermit-like retirement in which it seemed his pleasure to live—but all who did ask were quite sure to obtain their requests, the bestower, in every such case, being the happier for having made a fellow-creature even temporarily glad. There was nothing in this man's nature, warped though it had been in some important points by misfortune and injustice, to induce him to grudge to others the happiness that fate denied to himself. He liked to see people happy and cheerful—it warmed his heart, as a ray of even winter's sunshine will warm the frame of a poor shivering wretch to whom the luxury of a fire is unknown; and this feeling was largely increased when the happiness or cheerfulness in question had been in the smallest degree of his own procuring or intensifying.

Mr. Spenser had, apparently, asked a very

small matter of him now. He would have thought nothing of the loan of all the Hall carriages and horses to any one of his neighbours. He would have esteemed it the highest privilege, as the reader is aware, not only to lend, but to bestow the Hall itself, and everything it contained, upon Margaret Bellew. He would consider himself blessed beyond measure in an opportunity of going with that sweet woman to any place in the wide world. To spend an hour with her in the green leafy Dunross woods would be joy unutterable ; and wherefore, then, this being included in the rector's simple request, should the request itself appear a hard and a cruel thing to him ?

It was just that his mind had taken in, with lightning swiftness, the real bearings of the whole case. While the rector was preferring his petition, David Fletcher had opened his mental eyes wide enough to see below the surface that was exhibited to him, and to have a very natural shrinking from what he saw.

Not only was he to forego all hope of

winning Margaret for himself, even as a tender sympathizing friend, but he was to be used as a cat's paw in winning her for somebody else. This middle-aged bachelor clergyman, who had kept his heart and his liberty till now, was evidently seriously smitten with the attractions, moral and physical, of the young stranger who had so abruptly made her appearance in the dull neighbourhood, and with so little consciousness of the power she was destined to wield. Being free to marry, being in many respects a husband to be coveted, he would woo and win her without delay. The rectory had long wanted a mistress; the parish had long needed a female head. Miss Bellew was, no doubt, eminently calculated for the position that was to be offered to her. The mother, prepossessed already by the gentlemanly and clever rector, would rejoice in such a settlement for her daughter. The whole thing was, in short, cut and dried, and with nothing in the world against it except that impotent and foolish pain at one weak human heart.

A heart to which pain was too familiar for

any degree of it to come quite as a strange thing ; so David Fletcher took brief time for consideration, when he had learned what his guest required of him, but answered, courteously, that he was ready to join in any plan that Mr. Spenser thought would be agreeable to the ladies at Abbotsmead. His carriages were all at their disposal, or he would propose making one of the party the rector wished to arrange, supposing there should be any difficulty in getting Mrs. Bellew to accept the loan of a vehicle under other conditions.

“ Oh,” said the rector, rising now, and discovering that it was time to bring his long visit to a conclusion—“ the party will be the thing to please everybody, I am convinced. But you will take your niece to call at the house first. It quite vexes me that we have no ladies at Ditchley that Miss Bellew could possibly care for. It will, of course, be different when the Misses Fletcher are at home.”

David had his own thoughts on this matter too ; but he gave no hint of dissent-

ing from the rector's statement. He was very tired of the whole interview, and of all the agitating emotions it had entailed on him. He gained, however, a further victory over himself by asking his guest to remain to dinner, and was rewarded for this, at least, by hearing that Mr. Spenser could not indulge in that pleasure, as his two curates were coming to eat their quarterly regulation dinner with him.

He was gone at last, the door fast closed behind him, and the wearied master of the Hall had just leant back in his chair, and breathed a sigh of thankfulness at the certainty he felt of having the rest of the evening to himself, when the drawing-room door was again opened by the old butler, who, in an almost apologetic, and something of an aggrieved tone, announced :—

“Please sir, Miss Meredith is come.”

CHAPTER X.

RHODA.

HAD David Fletcher known what was really good for him, he would have welcomed any outward event, however vexatious in itself, that hindered him from entering that world of morbid thought which was fast growing into a dangerous temptation, and threatening to sap up all the healthy energy and manliness that the unhappy circumstances of his life had left in him. But not having yet attained the rare wisdom of discerning between good and evil in his own case, he felt irritated and indignant, for the moment, at the news of his guest's arrival a day before her time ; and bidding the man show Miss Meredith to the drawing-room, he indulged

in a dreary sigh or two, stirred the decaying fire into a blaze, and then stood before it, waiting with less resignation than usual for the new ingredient an ever malignant fate was about to mix into his bitter cup.


Of course he had got a picture of this Rhoda in his mind. A young woman, not without personal attractions perhaps (the Merediths were all good-looking), but with a face strongly expressive of her protest against the folly and wickedness of the world she was compelled to live in; a self-possessed, chilling manner (poor David could not for the life of him imagine any relative of his late wife otherwise than chilling), and a general aspect of off-handed, complacent young ladyism, that the sensitive gloomy recluse of the Hall had a very peculiar anticipatory dread of.

He had, however, got ready his own little speech of welcome, which was not to be one jot less kind and cordial, whatever the first impression of his niece might be. For David's warm heart went out, in spite of all, towards the girl who met with no sympathy

in her own family, and who was, at any rate, leading a life of self-denial and active benevolence, even if she practised these virtues through a cloud of somewhat unwomanly severity and hardness, as Elizabeth's report of her had certainly more than implied.

But David Fletcher's carefully prepared little speech was destined to be quite forgotten, as, on the opening of the drawing-room door, and before the precise old butler had time to make his announcement a second time, a very slight girl, with a tall and rather drooping figure, came up quickly to the fire-place, and with a simple, hearty, "Oh, Uncle David, how good of you to be troubled with me," grasped one of the astonished uncle's hands, and offered her smooth and prettily rounded cheek for a kiss.

If David Fletcher blushed in his bewilderment at this wholly unlooked-for greeting from a stranger, nobody could greatly wonder, seeing that he had been all unused to caresses, especially voluntary ones, from his own daughters, and that his wife had la-




boured, through long years, to convince him that he must be an object of repugnance to every woman in the universe.

But whether he blushed or not, he undoubtedly felt wonderfully pleased, and, throwing both his arms round his niece, he returned her embrace with interest, telling her, in a voice rendered a little husky from such very new emotion, that the goodness was quite as much on her side, as he was a lonely forsaken man, and his house but a dull place for any young happy person to stay at.

“Then,” answered Rhoda, with a cheery smile, and a little affectionate pat on her uncle’s back, which David thought very droll and original—“it is quite clear that I have not mistaken my road, which means that I have come where I was wanted. By-the-by, I ought to have begun by apologizing for arriving a day too soon. I could not really help it, Uncle David. It had all to do with Polly, who wanted a holiday instead of coming here with me, and who would have had to travel alone if I had not forestalled

my journey, and gone a little out of my way to take her to her people. You see I cannot do without a companion of some kind in London, to trot beside me in the queer places I have to go into, to carry my basket and bundles, and to be a help in fifty different ways to me ; but here in the country I knew it would be different, and as Polly asked for a holiday, I was glad to let her have it. My poor mother always alludes to this small appendage of mine as my maid, and assumes that I cannot dress myself or do my hair without her—but oh, how I laugh sometimes at the notion ! Polly dressing anybody, or doing any hair but her own ! and yet she is an excellent child—I had her from an orphan training school—and suits me admirably.—This, however, is only to explain my premature appearance ; and now, uncle, shall I go and take my things off, for my head aches a little—and then I can come down and have a cup of tea, if you don't mind, while you are dining ?”

“ My dear girl,” said Uncle David, who was feeling pleasantly warmed and cheered



by the simple, homely manners, as well as by the affectionate demonstrations of this stranger, who had so abruptly alighted on his solitary hearth—"you shall do exactly what you like, now and always, while you are with me—but I want to have a look at you first, Rhoda. My ideal picture of you has evidently been greatly at fault. Will you take that thing off your head, my dear, and let me see my niece who has come to comfort and gladden me."

"That thing," meant a very broad brimmed black straw hat, with a wide gauze veil of the same colour. It matched the rest of the young lady's attire, which was plainness itself, and exhibited, if not absolute dowdiness, at least a total disregard of all the reigning fashions.

Rhoda laughed, as her uncle spoke, and immediately removed the obstructing head-gear.

"I am not much to look at, you see, Uncle David," she said, in her very pleasant voice—"all the beauty of the family being monopolized by my brother Herbert. I

never cared about beauty ; that is one comfort, and I am sure I have been spared no end of temptations in not possessing it. My cousin Elizabeth is excessively handsome, and even Amy promises to be very nice looking. Please tell me, Uncle David, when I may go."

David had forgotten the poor traveller's head-ache and dusty garments, while occupied in examining the face and figure of his quaint little guest.

It was very far from an unattractive countenance. The features were small, refined, and childlike, and but for the presence of a pair of spectacles which, however needed, seemed, at a first glance, oddly out of keeping with the extreme youthfulness of the face, Rhoda might have passed for a girl of fifteen. As it was, her figure being tall and drooping, and just now her cheeks somewhat thin and pale, she looked nearer twenty ; and there was something in the perfect ease and homeliness of her manner which no doubt added to this effect of premature womanliness, and, combined with the spectacles and

a curious little half motherly, half patronizing air (which became more observable to David later), gave to Rhoda Meredith a dignity that could not belong to her actual age, but which was really very pretty and original.

“You may go at once, my dear child,” the master of the house said at last, as he suddenly advanced a step nearer to his niece and kissed her warmly. “I have been cruel in keeping you so long, but come back to me, Rhoda, for your tea. Perhaps I ought not to tell you, but it is the simple truth, my dear, that you have done more to ease the aching of my heart—some hearts do nothing but ache in this world, Rhoda—in the few minutes you have been with me, than my own daughters have done all the days of their lives. Now, run away, love—the housekeeper will show you your room, and while we are at table you must give me your own history. I am curious to learn what nursery can claim the honour of turning out, in the present day, such genuine and unartificial plants as my niece Rhoda.”

But Rhoda, when she came back and sat down to her own tea at her uncle's dinner table, was almost too tired to be very talkative. David also made the discovery that, however frankly she might be willing to speak of herself, of her own labours, of her little Polly, and of the old married servant with whom she had lived during her mother's absence from London—the residence of this person being in the very heart of the city—Rhoda Meredith had a very singular and marked aversion to talk about her own family and her own home—it being an unmistakable fact that her usually serene and even happy face invariably clouded over, and grew sad and thoughtful, whenever any allusion was made to either Mrs. Meredith or Herbert. It could not be that she lacked affection for them,—David Fletcher was soon convinced that his quiet, unassuming little niece had a heart of very exceptionally large dimensions—nor was it even probable that their want of sympathy in her aims and pursuits had chilled one so unselfish and humble minded, to any great extent. It could only be, David

at length decided, that she knew their lives to be utterly frivolous and ignoble, and that the consciousness of this weighed upon her heavily, and made the bare mention of them a pain. Not altogether an agreeable thought to David himself, when he reflected on the present position of his own daughters, and on their openly avowed preference for Mrs. Meredith's guardianship and society.

But in spite of all drawbacks, the uncle and niece spent a really charming evening together, the former eliciting quite enough information, by dint of persevering cross questioning, to account for Rhoda's pale cheeks and the necessity of her coming out of London for change and rest. She told him that from her very earliest years she had felt an earnest wish to devote her life in some way or other to her poorer fellow-creatures, but that she had never thought of any definite work until she went once on a long visit to a godmother, who lived in one of the most densely populated quarters of London, and was a very ministering angel amongst the outcasts of that region. Here Rhoda

took her first lessons in visiting the sick and suffering, in familiarizing herself with poverty and sin and woe, in some of the ugliest shapes these crying evils of a refined age could assume; and here, too, under the teaching of one whose earthly work was nearly done, she first learnt the blessedness of sacrificing personal ease and luxurious indolence, in the earnest effort to bring some portion of comfort and gladness to those whose whole lives were spent amidst the darkest shades.


On the death of her godmother—the same from whom she inherited her little property — Rhoda continued, with ever growing interest and enthusiasm, the labours she had formerly pursued with her beloved instructress and guide. The small child, Polly, was engaged as her constant attendant, and these two were in the habit of going daily into some of the lowest and most miserable haunts of the great, wild, evil city, a fraction of whose utter wretchedness that one frail girl was doing her utmost to relieve. During the months she had been living a perfectly free life, and so much

nearer to the scene of her ministrings, Rhoda confessed that she had worked harder than she found it possible to do while in her mother's house, and hence the exhaustion and need of repose to which, at length, she had been obliged to yield.

"And which I, at least, cannot greatly quarrel with," said David, who was wondering over his newly found niece as if she had been sent to him direct from some other planet, "since it has been the means of bringing you here to me ; but Rhoda, my child, I don't half understand anything you have been telling me yet. What do you say or do when once you have gained admittance into the dens of these savages ? Do you venture upon preaching to them ?"

"Oh no," laughed Rhoda. "I do no preaching, uncle, and very little teaching. There are plenty of City missionaries and Bible women who do all that far better than I could. I make friends with the children when there are any, and this is almost always. I take them tiny presents ; I read little stories to them ; I get the mothers

sometimes to send them to school. Then, having begun with the children, I have usually less difficulty with the parents. I listen to all their complaints and troubles. I try to make the untidy ones neat and tidy ; I teach some of them a little simple easy cooking, if they will learn. I take my needle and thimble and stitch away for them while they talk. I find out what they want most in the way of material help, and, as far as I can, I help them. The drinking cases are by far the worst, and the most painful in every way, especially when it is the wife who indulges ; but with patience and perseverance, and by showing the unhappy creatures that you have hope for them—this is a great point—I have been able to do a little even with these. I have said that I never preach, Uncle David, and this is strictly true, but I always go with my Bible and a good supply of tracts, and whenever I get the least encouragement to read to my people I very gladly do so—sometimes with the happiest results. Oh, and I ought to tell you that now and then



I find real devoted children of God amongst the very poorest of those I visit ; and in these cases the learning is all on my side. To know what godliness *can* do, you must go into the homes of poverty, and want, and sickness—it is wonderful, indeed, beyond all telling, to see its triumphs here, and enough to humble to the dust all who are less severely tried. When I find any of my people sick, I nurse them—they will all let you do this, however little they may appreciate your visits while they are in health, and I learnt nursing from my godmother, who had been trained in a regular hospital when she was young. But how I am chattering, Uncle David, under the temptation, I suppose, of such a patient listener ! Let me be quiet now, while you tell me something of yourself. I want especially to know in what way I can be a help and a comfort to you while I am here.”

“ You are a marvellous little woman, Rhoda,” said the uncle, whose admiration was fast getting in advance even of his wonder ; “ and my curiosity is by no means

exhausted on the subject of your herculean, and, as they appear to me, preposterous, labours, yet. I can't imagine how the rough, hardened, demoralized beings you go amongst are brought to pay any heed, except in the way of taking your gifts, to such a very youthful, delicate looking creature as yourself. I should have thought they would scoff at the idea of your understanding anything of them or their miseries."

"No," replied Rhoda gravely, "I have very little scoffing to contend with. I think most of the people are too ignorant, or too indifferent to everything apart from their own immediate necessities, to know much about age. Besides, Uncle David, my spectacles do a great deal for me, I assure you. I really require them for my sight, but I should wear them now if I did not, since I have found out what additional respect they ensure for me. Bless you! I am looked up to and consulted on all subjects as if I were sixty instead of not quite eighteen. As for my little Polly, I am convinced she sets me

down as the oldest woman in the world. I was telling her once, to make her laugh, of one of my tiny scholars in the Sunday school having asked me, with the utmost gravity, if I had seen Noah and his family go into the Ark. Well, Polly neither laughed nor appeared the least surprised, and yet she has plenty of brains, and is by no means hazy on ordinary subjects."

"I am beginning to stand in great awe of you myself," laughed David, "so that I can, in some degree, sympathize with your bright handmaiden. But now listen to me, Rhoda, for a moment. You are to rest absolutely here, and get some colour into those poor white cheeks again. We have a rector at Ditchley who is very fond of setting ladies to work in his parish, but I won't have you do his bidding in the very mildest way. You belong to me, remember, for the whole of your visit, and not to any paupers, or mendicants, or school-brats whatever. To-morrow we will arrange what we are to do for your entertainment and the most speedy improvement of your health—but

one thing I must impress upon your mind at once, and that is, that work of all kinds is strictly forbidden."

"If you can teach me how to rest without working, I will try to be obedient," smiled Rhoda, as she went up to kiss her uncle and wish him good-night. "Anyhow, nature is calling me to rest now, and the morrow will take care of the things of itself. Dear Uncle David," she added, as the lonely man held her yearningly in his arms for an instant, "I am so glad I have come to you. We shall never be strangers to each other again."

And poor David, when the door had finally closed upon his Heaven-sent guest (he believed, even then, in his very soul, that she *had* been sent of Heaven), buried his quivering face in his hands, and revelled in the new, strange sweetness of having felt the pressure of loving human lips upon his cheek, and listened to the words of genuine human affection.

CHAPTER XI.

DAVID BRIGHTENING UP.

“DON’T let Miss Meredith be disturbed for another hour,” said Mr. Fletcher, meeting his housekeeper in the hall as he went down the next morning to his own tolerably early breakfast; “she was very tired last night, and she can have what she likes taken up to her in her own room by-and-by.”

The housekeeper, who had lived at the Hall before her present master’s time, and was quite a privileged individual, smiled with a little air of superior knowledge as she answered—

“Oh sir! Miss Meredith is not one of your lie-a-bed young ladies, tired or not tired. She was up this morning soon after

six, and had been all over the grounds by the time I was in my room, where she came and found me, and was condescending enough to have a cup of tea with me. She is waiting now, sir, to pour out your coffee for you in the breakfast-room, and I dare say will like to tell you the rest herself. A very sweet young lady as ever I have had to do with, sir; and it makes me quite happy that she has come to be your companion."

"Thank you, my good Barrington, thank you," said David, in the kindly tone he always adopted with his servants. "My niece seems indeed a very charming girl, but she should not have got up so early. She has been ill, you know, Barrington, and has come here for rest and nursing. We must take better care of her than this, or it will never do."

And without waiting for any additional comments from Mrs. Barrington, David Fletcher hurried on to the breakfast-room, divided between a conscientious resolve to expostulate with his niece on her imprudence, and a yearning to receive upon his

long-time desolate hearth a loving morning greeting.

In this last he was not disappointed. Rhoda, looking very bright and happy, and with even a faint pink colour in her cheeks, sprang to meet her uncle as he came in, and, foreseeing by his uplifted finger that a scolding was impending, she first rained upon him a little shower of kisses, then patted him gently on the back as she had done, to his secret amusement, the night before, and finally (without giving him a chance of speaking) said, with a pleasant, girlish laugh :—

“I can’t stay in bed such mornings as these, uncle, and with the temptation of such grounds as yours to explore. I have had the most lovely ramble imaginable, and I feel worlds better for it already. How can my cousins ever want to be away from a place like this ? Dear Uncle David, do come and sit down now, and let me give you your breakfast ; it is so nice to have somebody to wait on and take care of. At home, my people won’t let me do anything for them,

and my talents are utterly wasted. Your good housekeeper made me have some tea with her an hour ago, and I did so enjoy it after my delicious blow out of doors. But now for your coffee, uncle, before I have talked you quite into a fever. I am really not a great talker generally, but this place of yours is inspiring, and I don't feel altogether so staid and sober as I do in London."

"I love to hear you talk, my dear," said David, submitting to be led to his seat with a well-contented smile, that expressed but a fraction of the ineffable enjoyment he was deriving from this novel state of things; "and if I do not scold you for your early rising this one morning, Rhoda, you must look upon my forbearance as an especial grace, which is intended to ensure better behaviour on your part for the future. Bring your chair close to mine, love, and tell me how you slept, and how long you have really been wandering about alone in those damp shrubberies."

"Oh, I slept like a top," said Rhoda, as

she busied herself in waiting on her companion ; “ and I can’t be exact as to the time I have spent out of doors—it passed too quickly and delightfully. I was not alone, though, uncle, for I made friends with your old gardener, and he pottered about with me, and showed me everything. It was this long talk with him that led to my going to Mrs. Barrington’s room. He told me he had a little grand-daughter at home who is thought to be wasting away, though the doctor finds nothing wrong with her lungs. Well, I have seen many such cases amongst the children of the lower classes, and sometimes I have been able to treat them successfully. I promised to go down after breakfast and see the poor little mite. Oh, it is nothing of a walk, uncle ; the old man gave me the plainest directions. And so I found out your housekeeper, to beg from her a small quantity of oatmeal and a few other things, to carry with me. She was as kind as kind could be, Uncle David, and readily agreed, dear woman, to give me all I wanted. I shall not be gone above

an hour at most, and then I will come back and read your newspaper to you, or write your letters, or do anything else to help you, for the rest of the morning. You won't mind my just running down to the old man's cottage, will you?"

David Fletcher could only gaze at his niece in pure and ever-growing wonder. Language, even of admiration or commendation, just now he had none. He was thinking of a verse he believed to be somewhere in the Bible, and trying to repeat it correctly to himself—"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Rhoda, all unconscious of creating any extraordinary impression, mistook her uncle's silence for disapproval of what she had been doing, and hastened to apologise for taking such liberties in his house, and for having made herself at once so much at home.

"My dear child," said David at last, holding the wistful, upturned face of his niece lovingly between his two hands, "be assured of this, that the more you can feel

at home with me the happier I shall be ; and remember, too, that everything in my house that you can possibly need is at your disposal. While I was silent, Rhoda, I was fearing that my little stranger-guest would suddenly flap a pair of very pretty wings at me and fly away. Promise not to do this, and I shall be quite content."

"Oh, I promise faithfully," laughed Rhoda, delighted to see signs of a mirthful spirit in the melancholy, dreamy man she was beginning to love. "And you will let me help you, Uncle David, in all your daily work, won't you? By-the-by, what do you do mostly with your long hours of leisure? With your means and your opportunities, you have a vast field open to you."

"Have I?" answered poor lonely unsatisfied David, with one of his old sighs. "If it is so, Rhoda, more's the pity; for there will certainly be no golden harvest of *my* gathering in. Dear child, you make me feel my own utter nothingness in a busy, cheerful world, more even than I have ever felt it yet. I am only a miserable idle dreamer,

Rhoda, sitting here in my solitude, and sighing for individual happiness. This will be incomprehensible to you, love, who live for others, and never think of yourself at all ; but I have ever had a strange, craving, hungry nature, my little Rhoda, and while my own heart has gone starving, its cry has been too loud to permit of my hearing the duller cry of the sorrowing humanity around me. Perhaps it has been reserved for you to teach me better things."

"Poor dear uncle!" said Rhoda, gently, as she went and laid her soft hand upon his cheek; "I can teach you nothing, being only a slow and awkward learner myself; but I think the individual happiness you have been yearning for would be the surest found in making others happy, in contributing, in ever so small a degree, towards the lightening of that heavy burden which is crushing more than half our sin-sick world into despair and hopelessness."

"And of which burden I have certainly had *my* share," said David, with a momentary return of the bitterness that had

so long poisoned all his life; "though it has not come to me in the shape of poverty or acute physical suffering. Rhoda, my child, be assured that human sorrow has an endless variety of aspects, and be especially thankful that, through some marvellous grace of God, you have been endowed with a nature in which self has too little prominence to make it possible for you to suffer as many do, and must do, to their journey's end."

"I *am* thankful, unspeakably thankful, dear uncle," said Rhoda, meekly, "for that marvellous grace of God which has taught me where to look for real enjoyment, and I hope before long to be thankful that you are a partaker of it too. Only, don't let the individual happiness you speak of be your chief anxiety. That comes, I think, when we are neither greatly concerned about it, nor doubtful of our Father's love in withholding (and that, perhaps, only for a time) what *we* call good. But I must run off to my doctoring now, which is, in fact, a line

that suits me infinitely better than preaching."

"Yet preach to me whenever you will," said David, earnestly; "I am not too proud, after all my barren, comfortless years, to learn wisdom from pure and guileless lips like yours, my little Rhoda."

Nevertheless, when he was alone, this poor foolish dreamer, though he thought much both of Rhoda and her saintly wisdom, thought more of Margaret Bellew, and all her sweet human attractions. For though it is true that he had derived intense enjoyment from the discovery of an affectionate, tender nature in the girl whom he had consented to receive almost out of charity, and assuredly against his inclination, it was none the less a fact that a large portion of the exhilaration he had been conscious of, since Rhoda's arrival, arose from the thought which as yet he was half afraid of welcoming, that if this woman could look upon him without shrinking, nay, could express affection, and lavish upon him spontaneous caresses, there could exist no logical reason

why another woman should not, in process of time, and in return for the wealth of devotion he knew he could give, be brought to regard him with something closer and dearer than mere friendliness.

It was this thought, I say, that gave the real, pungent flavour to the cup of nectar from which David Fletcher was just now so complacently sipping, and the extreme novelty of whose taste might have intoxicated, for awhile, a far stronger brain than this man of dangerously susceptible heart, and long-repressed feelings of passion and tenderness, could boast of possessing.

When Rhoda came back from her errand of love, she found her uncle eagerly looking out for her, but he would not listen for a moment to her suggestion of reading aloud to him. Another day he should enjoy it above everything, but this morning he was going to write a letter or two, and he should like her to rest on the sofa in his study, or, if rest was impossible to such an ever-active little lady, to bring her work and sit beside him, lest he should become incredulous, in

not seeing her, of the reality of the warm sunbeam that had shone, at length, athwart his gloomy pathway.

"And, after lunch, Rhoda, love," he said, while a sudden light and colour kindled in his grave face, and took a dozen years of age away, "I have ordered the carriage for a drive, and for a call which I want you to make with me upon some ladies recently settled in our neighbourhood. You will not mind, will you?"

"Surely not, dear uncle," responded the niece, with her winning little smile; "but you know I am a very contemptible specimen of a young lady from London. It is to be hoped your friends won't expect me to talk about the opera, or the parks, or the exhibitions, or anything that has to do with the world of fashion and gaiety. Why, my mother would as soon think of taking my ignorant little Polly to make a call in what she considers good society, as of taking me."

"But," said David, secretly amused, "I don't believe these ladies belong to what

Mrs. Meredith would reckon good society. I only know one of them myself yet, but I am sure she is more likely to talk to you of primroses and ferns than of either of the subjects you have mentioned. Her name is Margaret—a specially favourite name of mine. I shall be glad if you get on well together.”

Perhaps it was something in the tone that caused Rhoda to look up suddenly at David, as he spoke those last words. But if so, her woman’s instinct helped her to withdraw her gaze immediately, and to reply cheerfully—

“I have no doubt, dear uncle, that we shall.”

CHAPTER XII.

MARGARET AT HOME.

It was a fortunate accident for all concerned that the afternoon selected by David Fletcher for calling with his niece at Abbotsmead, happened to be one of Mrs. Bellew's very best days. Everything in her little world—to most of us it is an exceedingly little world wherein are centred our individual hopes and fears and interests—had gone smoothly and pleasantly of late. The garden had received its last finishing touches that morning. This in itself was an important matter to the lady of the house. She professed herself heartily sick of seeing Mr. Perkins's face day after day, and she thought Margaret had wasted quite enough

time, and soiled more than enough washing dresses, over an occupation that, after all, was infinitely less womanly and graceful than needlework, which, with a perversity wholly incomprehensible to the well-disciplined mother, the daughter she had educated was far too prone to neglect.

Now, the young lady would have no excuse for not sitting down regularly for the two hours succeeding breakfast to her darning, mending, or making, as the case might be.

But Mrs. Bellew had a deeper source of self-congratulation than even this. Mr. Spenser, the bachelor rector of Ditchley, was becoming decidedly particular in his attentions to Miss Bellew. He rarely allowed three days to pass without coming over on some pretext or other. He had brought both his curates, at different times, to call on the ladies. He had lent Margaret books; he had sent her choice plants from his own garden; he had consulted her upon a variety of parish matters, ignoring Margaret's openly acknowledged lack of either experience or interest in such things; and

finally, he had expressed a hope that he should soon be able to organize a sort of gipsy party to the woods, for the especial gratification of the young lady of Abbotsmead.

Now to make clear Mrs. Bellew's secret pleasure in all this, it must be explained that the one dream of her own youth—she had been far too practical a body from her cradle to have made day dreaming a constant pastime—but the one dream of her youth had been to marry a well-to-do clergyman, enjoying a fat living, in the country if possible, and having a large parish under his management and control. To an intensity of faith in her own capability of ruling this mythical rector, his household, and the entire flock of which he would be the nominal overseer, Mrs. Bellew (she was Miss Mary Ann Rashleigh then) united a firm conviction that the thing ought to have been; and when a sadly bungling destiny bestowed on her for a husband only a solicitor in moderate circumstances, practising in a very obscure country town, she was con-

vinced that a grievous mistake had been made, and thought it hardly worth her while to rule, to any noticeable extent, the meek, easy-going man, who was so willing to give the reins of government into the hands of his clever, energetic wife.

Thus, for many long years that fond girlish ambition had been put to sleep, and the ordinary duties of an unusually quiet and monotonous life taken up courageously in its place; and had Mrs. Bellew's only child been a son instead of a daughter, the chances are that her well-regulated mind would have enabled her to forget, in process of time, that she had ever cherished such a dream, and to forgive the malignant fate which had disappointed it.

But finding herself a widow in tolerably comfortable circumstances while still in the prime of life, with a little girl who promised to grow up very fairly attractive, Mrs. Bellew was not unnaturally tempted to remember the old personal ambition, and to revive it on behalf of her gentle, tender-eyed Margaret. Some women even older than herself

would have revived it on their own account, but Mrs. Bellew's principles were strongly opposed to the re-marriage of either widows or widowers, an act she would declare to be, in her opinion, if anyone ever argued the point with her, little short of bigamy.

Since Margaret had been grown up (and this, as I have confessed to my reader, had been for a considerable number of years) Mrs. Bellew had been secretly on the look out for an eligible bachelor vicar, constructed upon the model always carefully treasured in her own mind. In every country place the mother and daughter had sojourned at, this object had been kept well in view ; and though there had never been any excess of anxiety or any manœuvring in connection with it, (for, to do Mrs. Bellew justice, she was far above that sort of thing,) still the maternal eye had been open and on the alert, and perhaps as much wonder as disappointment experienced, secretly, when one unmarried clergyman after another came under the spell of Margaret's quiet attractions, and was not subdued by them.

Perhaps the young lady, not participating in her mother's hopes, not even aware of their existence, may have snubbed these eligible ecclesiastics when they tried to make themselves agreeable to her ; or, perhaps, they preferred a state of celibacy, or perhaps their hearts had been otherwise bestowed before they had the privilege of an introduction to Miss Bellew. Certain, in any case, it was that Mr. Spenser, the rector of Ditchley, and in all respects superior to the rectors who were now but as dim shadows of the past, proved to be the first who discovered in Margaret Bellew the one woman for whom he could sacrifice his liberty. Such, at least, was the daily growing conviction of Margaret's quick sighted mother, and, as I have said, the belief was especially welcome and agreeable to her. Could it have entered into her wildest thought, at this early stage of the drama, that the widowed and deformed master of the Hall, the "poor David Fletcher," of whom they had heard so much since their arrival in the neighbourhood, was likely to

become a rival to the handsome and in every way charming rector, Mrs. Bellew would have experienced no shadow of uneasiness. The idea of any woman in her senses comparing the two men in the light of a husband, would have seemed to her too infinitely absurd to be even glanced at. Mr. Fletcher might be very well as a neighbour and an occasional dropper in, and, of course, when Margaret reigned at the rectory it would be pleasant for her to be on friendly terms with the inmates of the Hall ; but it is doubtful whether Mrs. Bellew, with her prejudices and antipathies, would have suffered her mind to dwell on poor David, even to this extent, had she not observed that Margaret was fostering a ridiculous sentimental interest in the man and his misfortunes, as they had been stupidly and senselessly brought to her notice by that soft-headed fool, Perkins.

When Mr. Fletcher and Miss Meredith were announced on the afternoon of their visit, Mrs. Bellew, dressed now for the day, and seated in her drawing-room with her

strip of embroidery in her hand, and her newspaper on a small table beside her (in this order of things there was never a shade of variation from year's end to year's end), received them both with very tolerable graciousness, leaving Margaret, however, who had been at the piano, to assign them places, and to originate a preliminary conversation of some kind.

Fortunately Miss Bellew had, amongst her many attractions, perfect self-possession, and a very rare tact. She had learned long ago to cover all her mother's social deficiencies by her own sweet graciousness and ready wit. Desiring now, above all things, that Mrs. Bellew should take kindly to David, and that David should take kindly to Mrs. Bellew, she placed his chair close to the little round table, and, as a hint which she did not doubt he would at once understand, she referred adroitly to a striking leading article in the day's paper that had been interesting her mother, and left the two to discuss it together.

Then, drawing the quiet looking Rhoda

to the other end of the room, she set herself to the task of discovering what topic of ordinary conversation was likely to interest a young lady who, in the fast nineteenth century, and newly arrived from London, dressed as plainly as a nun, and, without a vestige of shyness, had the face, but for the disfiguring spectacles, of an innocent baby.

Rhoda soon came to the assistance of her somewhat puzzled hostess by saying (after a few general remarks on either side that had led to nothing):

“How pretty your garden looked as we came in. Will you take me round it? I think my uncle told me you were very fond of flowers.”

This was a delightful breaking of the ice, and Margaret thoroughly appreciated it. Passing the elder couple at the little table, she mentioned to her mother that Miss Meredith had expressed a wish to walk round the garden, and was half amused and half touched by the wistful, pleading look in poor David's mournful eyes, which said as plainly as any human eyes could speak—

“Can’t you invite me to come too? Don’t you know that you and your flowers have more attractions for me than Mrs. Bellew and newspaper articles?”

But as yet Margaret could not see her way to rescue the unfortunate gentleman from his temporary penance. Her mother had got upon a favourite hobby, and as she could talk well and shrewdly when she liked to exert herself, and David had hitherto listened with the most deferential attention to all she said, it was not to be expected that it would meet her views, or favour the chance of her thinking well of her present guest, if he should, on any pretext, abruptly withdraw to the society of the younger ladies.

So Margaret could only smile back gently and sweetly upon him (possibly her womanly instinct was revealing to her already what those smiles were worth) while she led Rhoda to the newly made lawn and fernery and kitchen-garden, winding up with the still untouched orchard, where a faint perfume of pear and cherry blossoms was

beginning to enrich the soft air, and where the two girls waded knee deep in nodding grass, laughing as they came sometimes in sharp contact with a giant nettle or a hidden bramble, and fast forgetting, as they chatted on any subject that suggested itself at the moment, that they were only acquaintances of less than an hour.

David Fletcher being the readiest link between them, they talked first of him, and Margaret, apprehending quickly all that the new element of interest he had acquired must be to the lonely and hitherto unsolaced man, rejoiced unfeignedly in the little niece's advent, and was even disposed to envy her the rare opportunity of blessing, by her affection and sweet attentions, one who had been so long unblessed.

When, in answer to the questions of her gracious and pleasant hostess, Rhoda told something of her own life and labours in London, Margaret wondered greatly, and was inclined at first (having always rather depreciated the work of amateur and lady missionaries) to rank poor Rhoda amongst

the crowd of weak women who fancy they must have a special mission, and rush blindfold through any door that will open to admit their foolish and incompetent feet. But there was something in Rhoda's extreme simplicity and total lack of self consciousness, that soon won upon Margaret's trust; and perhaps, too, the quiet little girl in the straight grey dress and spectacles had a halo round her head which would, in any case, have disposed the one to whom it was so preeminently visible to judge her by a different standard from that she employed in judging the rest of the world.

It was perhaps more the secret satisfaction she derived in talking of David Fletcher than from a thirst for information on an abstract subject, that prompted Margaret to say, while leading her companion back to the house—

“But to whatever extent you may have trained yourself to like acting as nurse and doctress, and ministering angel generally, to these only half humanized creatures in their gloomy dens and alleys, surely it is an

infinitely greater joy to you to be comforting and brightening the life of your poor lonely uncle, to be making up to him for the desertion of his own daughters, to know that you are winning his warmest love, and, in doing so, enriching him with a happiness he has possibly scarcely ever till now experienced. I can understand any woman glorying in such a work as this," she added, with an enthusiasm that Rhoda pondered on later, "but *your* work, except as a dreary martyrdom, undergone for duty's sake, I cannot really comprehend."

"You have not tried it, you see," replied Rhoda, who never indulged in heroics of any kind, and always dealt with every subject as simply as it was capable of being dealt with. "You cannot go much amongst the very poor and suffering classes without getting interested in them, and when once you are interested your work becomes a real enjoyment. Of course, being down here with my uncle, and thinking I am a little comfort to him, is very pleasant; and the lovely country, of which I know scarcely anything,

and his beautiful gardens, and his great kindness to me, all make me feel unusually bright and happy—but then—” and here the frank, girlish voice dropped lower, and took, unconsciously, a deeper and more thoughtful tone—“but, then, we know that personal brightness and happiness are not what we have to live for. They would soon, indeed, cease to exist for those who made them their chief concern. Dear Miss Bellew, I am sure you wrong yourself when you say you would have no pleasure in working amongst the poor and suffering. Don’t you do anything of the kind here?”

“No,” said Margaret; “and, probably, I never shall. I believe I have sympathies and a human heart, but I cannot generalize. I could sacrifice myself for one; I could—at least I believe I could—be content to live all my days in the shade to ensure a life of sunshine for one I loved; but then I should look certainly for some love in return, and the personal brightness and happiness you can make light of I should still covet and strive after as my natural and lawful earthly

heritage. If God is good, why should he not wish the creatures He has made to be happy? I believe in human happiness, as intensely as I believe in truth and virtue and all righteous things. It pains and jars against me to hear religious people talk as though all enjoyment was a plucking of the forbidden fruit, or as though God could not trust an intelligent being with any other emotions than those of gloom and sadness. I know *you* did not mean to imply as much as this," she added, half apologetically, for her words had been warmly and even excitedly spoken; "but your onslaught upon individual happiness suggested what I have listened to from so many; and there are some things that can goad me into arguing and declaiming, much as I detest such unwomanly practices in general."

"Well, I can't argue," answered Rhoda, with a smile. "I can only say that I intended much less than an onslaught on human happiness, when I spoke of it as being secondary to the highest good we may attain. But, indeed, it is very natural we

should esteem it and yearn for it; perhaps more natural still that we should desire it for those we love. I am sure if I stay long with my Uncle David, I shall be tempted to wish for him some large increase of happiness—mere individual happiness—as ardently as he is wishing it, poor man, for himself.”

The tender dreamy light sprang suddenly into Margaret’s eyes, and she walked silently beside her guest for a minute or two. As they were entering the house, she said softly—

“You have reached a far higher level than I, with my maturer years, have ever even aspired to—but on my lower range, I hope to have strength to walk worthily, and to do something with my life, though I cannot give it, as you give yours, to the thankless multitude.”

“If you only give it to the Master,” responded Rhoda, “all shall be well. When you hear a voice saying to you—‘Daughter, go work to-day in my vineyard!’ you will arise and go, quite confident that the right

place in the vineyard will be pointed out to you. Mine was almost before I had satisfied myself as to my willingness to obey the call."

"You are a marvellous child!" exclaimed Margaret, as with a sudden impulse she seized Rhoda's hand—the hand which had worked too honestly for others, to be very white or smooth—and gave it a hearty squeeze; "and you must come and see me often while you are at the Hall. Remember, *I* want being done good to, and you must come and do me good."

"*That* is not my province," smiled Rhoda; "but I will come very gladly to increase my personal enjoyment by a sight of you and your flowers."

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. BELLEW'S OPINION OF DAVID.

ONE would have thought that the two young women who had just been speaking so soberly together had taken in with them some of the golden sunshine they had left amongst the fruit trees in the wild orchard, to judge by the instant lighting up of David Fletcher's face as they entered the drawing-room. He had been very patient and very courteous in doing the agreeable all this time to Margaret's mother—it is to be presumed that her head too, or rather the very stylish cap with mauve ribbons which adorned it, was encircled with a halo plainly visible to David,—but he was growing tired now, and looking out, with somewhat restless yearnings, for his reward.

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Margaret, having every inclination to release and cheer him, and observing that Mrs. Bellew was in one of her most benignant moods, drew chairs for herself and Rhoda near the little table, and by this arrangement secured some kindly notice for the latter from the lady of the house, and for David her own undivided and cheerfully bestowed attention.

But of course, with another dialogue going on close behind them, they could only speak on the ordinary topics which belong to drawing-room conversation, and here, as I have explained before, poor David never shone. He wanted to have Margaret to himself, to gather his honey during the present shining hour, when no hungry bees, in the shape of admiring rectors, were at hand, to dispute with him the rare enjoyment for which his own soul was now for ever hungering and thirsting.

Mrs. Bellew had told him (and he could not help thinking she had a purpose in so doing) how often Mr. Spenser came to Abbotsmead, how kind he was to Margaret, and

how she (the mother) regretted that her daughter would not take to parish work. All this had been the reverse of nuts and wine to David Fletcher, and he felt the need of a few of Margaret's tenderly sympathizing words, and a glance or two of those dove-like eyes, to dispel the gloomy ecclesiastical shadow which, thanks to Mrs. Bellew, had been for the last half hour tormentingly dogging him.

"I think we have arranged a party to the woods," he said, on one of the occasions when the rival dialogue seemed unusually animated—"Your mother had been won over to it by the rector, I find, or I should not have had much chance with her. She will not go in the morning," (a sudden but quickly suppressed smile from Margaret at the idea of her mother giving up any morning of her life to pleasure)—"but I may bring the carriage early in the afternoon—the first fine one it is to be—and the present party will just fill it. We shall take appliances for a gipsy tea in the woods, as that will be a great novelty and delight to my little Rhoda.

Mr. Spenser and his younger curate, Mr. Palmer, are to accompany us on horseback. I hope you like the idea?"

"Of the picnic, or the attendance of these gentlemen?" asked Margaret, mischievously, for she had seen, and been amused by the expression of David's face, as he mentioned the equestrian escort.

"Oh, I meant of the picnic," he said, discovering a new charm in her playful raillery, especially as it seemed to imply an insignificant appreciation of clerical society; "you will, at any rate, like the woods, and the birds that sing there, and the prim-roses——."

"Indeed I shall like everything about it," interrupted Margaret, eager to testify her sense of his kindness, and to convince him that the enjoyment he had planned for her was one she could thoroughly appreciate. "It will be a golden day for me, whatever it is for the rest of the party. I am very glad my mother has been won over."

"You can walk with us as far as the gate, can you not?" said David, in a low voice,

as soon after this he discovered (partly by Mrs. Bellew's growing fidgetiness), how late it was getting, and rose to say good-bye—"my niece will like to see all she can of you.'

So Margaret, though quite alive to the value of this last assertion, walked to the outer gate with their visitors, and had the satisfaction of noting that David Fletcher warmed and brightened with every gentle word she spoke to him, becoming bold enough to say, as she shook hands and parted from him at the gate—

"Promise me that you will try to give me some share (I know it cannot be the largest) of your society on our picnic day. I shall want this hope to live upon in the meanwhile."

"Oh, I promise," laughed Margaret with her lips, while her eyes had a sweet and tender seriousness in them, that should have contented even the doubting and exacting David. Perhaps it did, when he could forget that Mr. Spenser was a handsome bachelor, and evidently warmly favoured by

Margaret's mother, while he was a widower and deformed, and only smiled on pityingly at present by Margaret herself.

"And what do you think of our visitors?" asked Miss Bellew, with some abruptness, as she stood for a moment in the drawing-room doorway on her return to the house, a little nervous and anxious, if truth must be told, as to how the question would be answered.

Mrs. Bellew did not reply at all for nearly a minute. She was engaged upon a very elaborate leaf in her embroidery, and Margaret quite understood that the very close attention she was giving to her work, united to a peculiar sharpness in drawing out her needle and thread, was meant to suggest that she considered her late visitors had used little discretion as regarded the length of their stay. When she did lift her head, at last, it was with a jerk, and her words came forth as if they had shot from her lips by some piece of artillery that had malice in it.

"The girl is well enough, quiet and simple almost to rusticity, only that she is not a bit shy. As for the uncle, he is a gentleman, of

course, and knows how to behave in ladies' society, but beyond this I should take him to be a poor sentimental dreamy creature. I really can scarcely wonder that his wife snubbed him, or that his daughters should prefer being with people who have a little more go in them.—Don't stand there, Margaret, looking as if you were doing a *tableau vivant*, and letting a nasty cold draught into the room. There is a great deal in the paper I have not read yet, and, as you seem in an idle mood, you can come and read it to me."

The concluding part of this speech was decidedly snappish, and Margaret, who usually took all demonstrations of the kind very quietly and philosophically, felt specially aggrieved and irritated at her mother's tone. She went in, however, and shut the door behind her, taking the chair David Fletcher had so recently vacated.

"I think you are prejudiced against our neighbour at the Hall," she said with some spirit. "I am sure nature never meant him for a dreamer or a sentimentalist, but he has had a life of cruel suffering and wrong. You

talk of that woman he had the misery to call his wife snubbing him. Why, mere snubbing would have been tender mercifulness compared to what she really did do. She deliberately taught his children to loathe and hate him, as she loathed and hated him herself. She taunted him constantly with his lameness and personal defect. She told him no woman in the world could ever look upon him but with shrinking aversion. She made him at last regard himself almost as some fabled monster, unfit to live amongst his fellow men ; and over and above all this she had the temper of a fiend, which was wholly vented on her husband, the children being invariably treated with tenderness and indulgence, so that they were blinded to her faults, and only too ready—cold, spoiled, selfish things!—to take her part against the poor father. My belief is there never *was* such a case, and I only wonder David Fletcher does not dance every day over that grave in the Ditchley cemetery.”

“ He is such a pretty figure for dancing,” sneered Mrs. Bellew, who had, as the reader

knows, her own reasons for being put out and aggravated by her daughter's extraordinary warmth on the subject under discussion ; "but hoity toity, Miss Margaret ! how come *you* to know these minute details of Mr. Fletcher's domestic life. Has he made you his confidante to such an extent already ?"

"No, he has not," said Margaret, calming down, outwardly, at any rate ; "but it is matter of common gossip in the neighbourhood. Mr. Perkins has a servant now who lived at the Hall in the wife's time ; and though the tales of discharged servants are not often to be trusted, there have been a thousand confirmations on every hand of the terrible and heartrending statements made by the woman in question. Besides, if his daughters had one grain of affection or even pity for him, would they have left him all this time alone, knowing, as they must know, that he has a very tender love for them, in spite of their coldness and undutifulness ?"

"Well, he has got this niece now, and they seem to understand each other ;" (Mrs. Bellew's keen instincts were beginning to

warn her that anger and irony were ill chosen weapons against her daughter's craze just at present); "and by-and-by, if she remains with him, he will get on more friendly terms with his neighbours. I am sure I don't know what should bring him to call here, unless he is tired of his bearish life and anxious to lead a livelier one. In his position he could surround himself with the best of society if he chose. And he has, too, the advantage, so very rare in the case of a rich widower, of knowing that he is never likely to be angled for by manœuvring mothers for their portionless daughters, or by widows or spinsters of any kind or degree."

Margaret's soft eyes opened here to their very widest extent, showing something (if Mrs. Bellew had not been too intent on her strip of muslin to see it) of the fire that was blazing behind them.

"And what, may I ask, confers on Mr. David Fletcher the singular advantage you allude to? Perhaps I am unusually obtuse this afternoon; but I confess you have fairly puzzled me."

This was spoken with an almost dangerous quietness, and the speaker's face was pale, even to the lips. The answer came somewhat coldly, though there was an affectation of being rather amused than ruffled by Margaret's taking up the question so seriously.

"You might choose a stronger word than 'obtuse,' if your ignorance were real and not feigned. What woman in her right mind, or, I may say, with any self-respect, would voluntarily become the wife of that poor lame, deformed creature? The thing is against nature. He has been married once, I know: but, as you are so well up in common gossip, you have probably heard, as I have, that the late Mrs. Fletcher was goaded into the marriage by her relations, who wanted to get rid of her, and upon whom the whole world cried shame for their part in the matter. If she treated him as folks declare, I am not sure that I should not have found some excuse for her. I should feel like a wild bull in a net if I had a hunchback husband always in my sight. I suppose the feeling is very

wrong, but there it is, and I cannot help it."

"It is inhuman!" said Margaret, below her breath; but whether she referred only to her mother's boldly acknowledged aversion to deformed people, or to all that Mrs. Bellew had been stating as well, did not transpire. Immediately afterwards she took up the newspaper, and, in a proud indignant voice, which she tried hard to steady into simple coldness, said—

"Tell me what you wish me to read to you. It is senseless to continue an argument in which our views and feelings are wider than the poles asunder."

It happened that the next few days were cold, stormy, and miserable exceedingly. The very thought of a picnic, or even of a drive in an open carriage, was enough to bring on a fit of the shivers, and Mrs. Bellew seemed to take especial pleasure, when she and her daughter met every morning at their seven o'clock breakfast, in pointing out the state of the weather, and in predicting that things would get worse as the day

went on. They usually did get worse, but Margaret's temper was much too mild and sweet to be disturbed by trifles of this kind. When she fancied that it was her mother's aim specially to tease or irritate her, she would reply, very quietly and cheerfully :—

“The weather is not lively, certainly, but as regards our wood excursion, we can afford to be patient, as this is only the beginning of May, and we have the whole summer before us.”

On one of the very dreariest of the days I am writing about, Mr. Spenser walked out, through all the mud and rain and wind, to pay the ladies at Abbotsmead a visit. He had just received a box of new books from London, and was anxious that Margaret should have the first reading of some periodical she had once told him she had a great liking for. Besides this, he brought some famous recipes from his housekeeper for Mrs. Bellew, and a bottle of choice preserved peaches, which had grown on the sunny walls of the rectory garden.

All this was very kind and neighbourly,

and it would have been hard indeed on the poor clergyman if one of the ladies had not appreciated his attentions. The fact that there was a little twist in the matter was unguessed by his reverence at present.

Margaret was always sweetly and serenely gracious to him, and no occasion ever arose for her acknowledging that she was more interested in the lightest word that fell from the lips of poor David Fletcher, than in all the polished sentences and courtly phrases for which this highly cultivated rector was renowned.

He paid a very lengthy visit on the afternoon in question, but Mrs. Bellew neither made any complaints nor was driven into resuming her embroidery with feverish energy on his departure.

"What a very charming man that is!" she exclaimed, as the door closed finally upon him, actually rubbing her hands together in her pleased excitement, and appearing to be making a mental feast of the vicar's charming qualities.

"I suppose it is easy," said Margaret,

who was evidently not sharing in the choice banquet, "to be amiable and charming when all the world smiles upon one. Mr. Spenser appears to have most things his own way. Ample means, abundant leisure, perfect health, friends on all sides if he wants them, and a vocation that ought at least to be a source of never failing interest and delight. I consider your friend, the rector, a peculiarly fortunate man."

"At any rate," retorted Mrs. Bellew, emphatically, "his wife, if ever he marries, will be a very fortunate woman!"

Then she took up the embroidery, which really had been strangely neglected this afternoon, plied her needle and thread diligently, and said nothing more; while Margaret, opening wide the eyes of her mind, began for the first time to have a dim but pained suspicion of what her mother was actually hoping and expecting.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LADIES FALL OUT.

At length there came a really bright, old-fashioned May morning, with a strong though very soft and balmy west wind, which promised to dry up quickly the saturated earth, to shake the glittering rain drops from trees and shrubs and flowers, and to leave all nature in that refreshed and reanimated state which makes it a luxury even to breathe the outer atmosphere.

Contrary to her usual custom (for she heartily disliked very early rising) Margaret was in the breakfast room that morning a few minutes before her mother. The sun and the west wind combined gave her such a delicious buoyancy of feeling, such a

longing to begin the life of that day of exquisite promise, that she found it impossible to remain quietly in bed, and once downstairs her next impulse was to make a rush round the still dripping garden, where every rain and dew drop shone like a jewel in the morning sunlight, and where the warm air was laden with the scents of wall-flower, sweet-briar, and violets.

Margaret knew she must not linger long, though each minute was in itself a whole world of pure enjoyment; so, after one rapid circuit of the lawn and the kitchen-garden, she just stayed to pluck a sprig of sweet-briar and one lovely white narcissus, to lay beside her mother's plate, and then re-entered the breakfast room nearly breathless, but with a bright colour, and looking (as Mrs. Bellew acknowledged secretly) younger and prettier than she had looked for many a day.

But no acquisition of external beauty could justify, in this lady's eyes, the very irregular proceeding of tearing round a wet garden, hatless and shawlless, before breakfast, and coming in to that decorous meal

without breath, and with a general aspect of irrational excitement which, to say the least, was undignified and childish.

“I can’t really help it, my good mother,” explained Margaret, tendering her flowers as a peace offering. “I feel on such mornings as these as if I were full of quicksilver, which must be got rid of by rapid motion in the outer air, otherwise all my veins would tingle with it till I went mad. Don’t you know the sensation?”

Probably Mrs. Bellew did not; but in any case she had certainly experienced nothing of the kind for the last forty years, and being singularly deficient in the talent or gift of putting herself in another’s place—the least sympathetic woman that was ever created—she had neither comprehension nor indulgence for the nonsense, as it appeared to her, that her daughter was talking.

“Fiddlesticks!” she said, contemptuously. “I should be heartily ashamed of myself if I did know the sensation, as you call it. There, sit down and eat your breakfast, and let us get to our work. Those people will

be all coming in the afternoon for a certainty, and we must have dinner half an hour earlier. How I hate being put out by irregularities of any kind !”

There was no doubt that she did hate it, for her temper was none of the sweetest this morning ; and Margaret must have had a hidden fund of hope or happiness not to feel her spirits droop under the chill of the very wet blanket that was being applied to them.

Even her little graceful offering had given offence, and afforded occasion for a renewed attack upon her, as soon as the somewhat weak coffee had been poured out, and the regulation slice of ham duly cut and laid upon her plate.

“I wish you would not be so handy at gathering the flowers the very moment they come out,” was the ungracious complaint. “You know I don’t care for flowers stuck about a room, much less to wear them, like a sentimental dairymaid, in my belt or bosom, and I do like to see them in the garden, where I have paid for having them

planted. Don't do it again, please—it irritates me.”

Poor Margaret! She thought this so utterly unreasonable and uncalled for, that she could not help saying—

“Then, really, you must want an excuse for irritability, if you will pardon the suggestion. The garden can scarcely be impoverished by losing one narcissus—there are dozens in bloom—and a solitary bit of sweet-briar. And if it gave me pleasure to gather them for you, why should you grudge me the small enjoyment? My dear mother,” she added earnestly, and with the dancing light in her eyes changing to unwonted seriousness, “don't you think that in a world where we must all sooner or later come in contact with sorrow and bitterness of spirit, it is as good and noble a thing to promote each other's daily pleasures, as to live and act according to a set of cold rules that can bring satisfaction or comfort to no one.”

Margaret had never ventured on so much as this before. She was half frightened

when she had finished speaking now, but her whole nature had risen up in revolt against the churlishness of her mother's mood this morning. Apart from everything else, it seemed to her positively sinful and ungrateful to Providence to be cross-grained and disagreeable on such a day of Heaven's own sending. She could not understand it; she could not be indulgent to it; and, perhaps, it vexed and angered her the more that she felt sure it owed its origin to Mrs. Bellev's prejudice against David Fletcher, and her dislike to share in any amusement which he had suggested, and in which he himself would be a partaker too.

Of course, Margaret was fully prepared for the tempest which broke over her head as soon as her mother had sufficiently recovered from her first amazement to be able to be speak at all.

"Upon my word, Miss Margaret, things are coming to a pretty pass, when young women undertake to teach their mothers what is duty and nobility of conduct, and what is not. I don't pretend to know what

you mean, when you talk so glibly of living according to a set of cold rules ; but this I do know, that if I had made, in my young days, such a speech to my mother as you have just made to me, she would have boxed my ears till they rang again, and kept me on bread and water till I came to my senses. And it would have served me quite right too."

Margaret had a very strong and perverse inclination to smile at this, but, suppressing it resolutely, she said, with a mingling of quiet dignity and submissiveness,

"I am sorry if I spoke hastily, and by so doing appeared to fail in respect to you, my dear mother ; but you must, on calm reflection, see yourself, that for a woman turned of thirty to be lectured like a child for picking a single flower, in a garden which her own hands have laboured in for the last six weeks, is some justification for her feeling aggrieved. I sincerely beg your pardon if I have offended you. Let us sign a truce, in honour of this first lovely summer's day."

“Ring, and have the table cleared,” growled the elder lady, disdaining, except in this negative manner, to be coaxed into a reconciliation; “my morning’s work is of more consequence to me than an encounter of tongues with anybody. As for the day you are making such a fuss over, it’s well enough, but I was never taught that fine days were an excuse for idleness.”

As this latter observation struck Margaret as being wholly irrelevant to all that had gone before, she confined herself to ringing the bell, and then going to fetch her own work. That the natural and proper thing would have been to spend the whole of that enchanting morning in the garden, this obstinate young lady was still firmly convinced; but of course the tyrant of routine must be bowed down to and obeyed at all costs. She was too well aware of that grand fact by this time to make any attempt to rebel, more than she had already done, against long established custom.

Luckily, Mrs. Bellew’s storm-shaken spirit grew calm during her usual early morning

progress through the large rambling house. The discovery in the pantry of a cold potato or two which had been put aside and forgotten, and of a like proportion of cobwebs in some of the empty upstairs rooms, acted as a tonic upon her nervous system. She never scolded her very respectable and trustworthy hand-maiden—most likely she knew better than to indulge in that luxury—but if anything went wrong she just pointed it out to her in a cheery, triumphant sort of way, as if she would remind that somewhat too self-satisfied and independent personage that there were spots on the sun, and that she was too sharp not to find out every one of them.

By the time she joined Margaret with her huge and heavy laden work-basket, the state of Mrs. Bellew's temper was akin to seraphic ; and when, at the end of about an hour, she had succeeded in what she would herself have called "getting her sewing under"—there had been no conversation between the two ladies during that interval—she was quite ready to make a cheerful remark or two on

the subject of the fine day, and the chances of its holding up for the afternoon, or to reply goodnaturedly to any observations that Margaret (weary of the long silence and the monotony of her uninteresting occupation) might venture upon.

At about eleven o'clock there came a message from Mr. Spenser (who had received a communication from the Hall) to the effect that the whole party bound for the woods would be at Abbotsmead by two o'clock or a little after. Accompanying this verbal message was a splendid bouquet from the rectory greenhouse with Miss Bellew's name inscribed, in the rector's own elegant handwriting, on the glossy white paper surrounding it.

"I wish he wouldn't," said Margaret, looking with a discontented and ungrateful frown at the charming offering.

While Mrs. Bellew, who had so recently professed an indifference to flowers, except in their native beds, seized upon the nosegay, and buried her whole face so lovingly

amidst the fragrant blossoms, that her amused daughter was not surprised to see it emerge from the bath with patches, here and there, of bright gold powdering.

"He will expect you to carry these with you to-day, I suppose," observed the now smiling mamma, as she restored the flowers to their lawful owner ; "and it will be a little compliment that I think you ought to pay to so kind and generous a friend as Mr. Spenser has shown himself."

"People don't carry bouquets of half a ton weight to pic-nic parties," replied Margaret, laughing, even through her annoyance, at the thought of how it would look ; "besides," she added in a naughty spirit of retaliation, "I have your authority for concluding that it is only sentimental dairymaids who indulge in the bad taste of making flowers a part of their personal adornment. We will put these in the *épergne* at once ; for they are really very lovely, and they will scent the whole room."

Mrs. Bellew said nothing more. She was a wise woman, and knew when silence was judicious. Her own intense and ever growing appreciation of the rector of Ditchley made it seem impossible to her that his wooing of her daughter should, in the end, be unsuccessful. Now that she had got over for the day her natural dislike to the irregularity of a pleasure party, she hoped much from the opportunities that would be afforded Mr. Spenser during a long afternoon in the woods. Of course her mind was made up to secure poor David, little as she cared for him, as her own companion ; then the two young people would inevitably pair off together, and the rector find no difficulty in getting Margaret wholly to himself. If he did not make some progress under such favourable conditions, Mrs. Bellew almost thought that he would sink a little in her estimation ; but of course he would, being the clever, charming man he was, and everything would come right as regarded this most desirable match. Was it not the very least that destiny could

do to atone to poor Mrs. Bellew for the loss, so many years ago, of her own secretly longed for, but never enjoyed, ecclesiastical position ?

CHAPTER XV.

THE GIPSY TEA.

By two o'clock, the ladies at Abbotsmead had scrambled over their very early dinner—I can answer for one of them having little appetite for it—and were dressed and waiting for the friends who formed the larger division of their party.

At about twenty-five minutes past two—at least, Mrs. Bellew, who had consulted her watch repeatedly, and who estimated punctuality as one of the first of virtues, said that was the time—at about twenty-five minutes past two, the Hall and the Rectory arrived in company; that is, the large open barouche, containing Mr. Fletcher and his niece, was closely followed by the rector and his junior

curate, a stout, florid, and very good-natured looking young man, on horseback.

Having ascertained that Mrs. Bellew and her daughter were quite ready, it was agreed that there should be no delay in proceeding, only Mr. Spenser, consigning the reins of his very noble chestnut to Mr. Palmer for a minute, insisted on dismounting, that he might hand the ladies into David's carriage.

This act of courtesy helped to smooth Mrs. Bellew's temper, which, truth obliges me to confess, had been a little ruffled again by the want of strict punctuality on the part of those she had been waiting for. She was also gratified by the cordial way in which Margaret thanked the rector for his beautiful flowers; for she did not guess, poor lady, that her daughter's beatific mood, which inclined her to be in charity with all men to-day, was as unconnected with this charming Mr. Spenser as with his rosy-cheeked curate, who was smiling (out of the fulness of his content) upon everybody, and thinking how pretty Miss Meredith would be if she dressed a little smarter and did not wear spectacles.

Rhoda had, indeed, improved wonderfully in personal appearance since the night of her arrival at Ditchley. Her cheeks had rounded and gained colour, her eyes were brighter, when she allowed them to be seen, and her whole aspect betokened amended health and strength and spirits. As for David, Margaret observed, with the purest satisfaction, that he looked quite a different man; and, attributing it all to Rhoda, her heart warmed towards the quiet little girl who never asserted herself in any way, but whose influence was clearly of a very potent kind. She seemed in the brightest spirits this afternoon, and quite prepared to enjoy the novelty of the expedition for which they had fallen upon so rare a day. The Abbotsmead ladies wondered a little for what purpose this wholly unconventional young lady carried upon her arm an enormous bag, evidently filled with property of some sort. The provisions for their gipsy tea were all packed in a large hamper stowed away at the back of the carriage, nor was it likely, in any case, that Rhoda would have been

asked, or felt herself inclined, to bear the burden of any part of these. And as there were shawls and wraps innumerable heaped together in a corner of the carriage, it was tolerably certain that the mysterious reticule held nothing of that description.

Margaret, however, gave up speculating about it as the barouche drove off in the direction of the woods, and as David Fletcher, with some timidity, because of the watchful presence of that very formidable mamma, offered Margaret a single spray of exquisite white heather, and a crimson camellia, which till now he had been holding, with manifest carefulness, in his own hand.

"How very lovely they are!" said the recipient, with a blush that she had small chance of hiding; and then, having really nowhere else to put them, she slipped the flowers into her waist-band, lighting up her soft but very plain grey dress, and lighting up still more noticeably the eloquent eyes of the gentleman opposite to her, who, thoroughly satisfied with the fate of his

little gift, devoted himself willingly to a dialogue with Mrs. Bellew, while the two equestrians kept up to the carriage, and talked with Margaret and Rhoda.

It took quite an hour of tolerably fast driving to reach the Dunross woods—but the road was sufficiently pleasant and picturesque, and there was no dust, thanks to the heavy rains of the last week; and everybody expressed themselves charmed with everything, as indeed on such a day, and with so many elements of enjoyment to draw upon, they could scarcely help being.

Within a stone's throw of the woods, there was a small and very pretty inn, greatly frequented by picnic parties in the summer, and having accommodation for vehicles and horses in any reasonable numbers. Here the whole party alighted, leaving directions with the Hall servants as to where the hamper and wraps were to be brought at a later hour, and prepared themselves to begin the walking and exploring part of the business in hand.

At first, as the road was still wide and

open, they all kept pretty well together, though it would have been very evident to a looker on that there was a restlessness and a watchfulness of each other, in connection with two of the gentlemen, which was suggestive of a desire to alter, as soon as they could, this order of march, while the third, who was yet young and free of heart enough to enjoy a day's pleasure for its own sake, trotted on complacently beside Rhoda, swinging the huge bag (which he had politely insisted on carrying) by way of pastime, and forgetting every now and then his clerical dignity, so far as to begin whistling

“In the days when we went gipsying.
A long time ago.”

Margaret, knowing perfectly that both the elder gentlemen would strive to gain possession of her when the party separated, and being equally well aware that her mother would do her utmost to favour the rector, that it would, in short, be a case of might against right, felt a strong disposition to seize upon Rhoda, and run off with her alone out of sight of them all. She had no fear

that Rhoda herself would object to this plan, and her only hesitation arose from the conviction that it would be unfair to poor Mr. Palmer, who was looking so very rosy and happy, as it was, but who would probably scarcely care to hunt for ferns and primroses, during a long afternoon, in the company of one old lady, and two middle-aged gentlemen.

But all her reflections on the subject were abruptly put to flight when, as they came under the shelter of the first clump of trees, and saw a choice of winding, far reaching, woodland paths before them, Mr. Spenser, taking base advantage of David's attention being claimed for a moment by Mrs. Bellew, stepped gracefully forward, and held out his arm to Margaret, saying in his blindest voice—

“Miss Bellew, you know I have promised myself the pleasure of showing you the special dell where the finest wild flowers and mosses are to be found. Our friends will pardon our going a little in advance of them, as it is rather a long walk.” Then, turning

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with quite a triumphant smile to the rest of the party—"It is understood, you will all remember, that we meet under the large oak on the central grass clearing, at half-past four o'clock. Mr. Palmer, mind you look well after the young lady, and don't lose your way whatever you do. Mrs. Bellew, I know we are leaving *you* in good hands, and there are plenty of felled trunks, and mossy banks to rest on when you are tired."

With the exception of poor David, all the party addressed smiled back upon this very gracious gentleman, while Margaret, probably reserving to herself her woman's right to be agreeable or otherwise to the companion who had thus forced himself upon her, took the offered arm gravely, and bestowed *her* smiles, both of lip and eye, upon the injured friend she was leaving.

I may mention here that this friend, in the strength perhaps of that gentle smile, and the honour accorded to his flowers, bore gallantly the burden of the long hour he was condemned to pass alone with Margaret's mother. That lady, having witnessed

with her own rejoicing eyes the successful manœuvre of the accomplished rector, and being satisfied beyond all doubt that he would make the most of his time and opportunity, was in a mood to be entertained and rendered happy by the merest trifles. So she and David, after a very short stroll amongst the umbrageous trees, found out the central clearing, and, finding also the wraps and hamper which had arrived before them, contrived comfortable seats for themselves under the shadow of the big oak, where the lady, in course of time, fell to sleeping (nodding at the very least), and the gentleman to dreaming, while waiting for the moment of rendezvous with the rest of their company.

In reference to Margaret and her escort, and the famous primrose dell they visited, I will only say now that they found abundance of primroses and anemones and aconites, returning to their friends laden with these treasures, but with neither of their countenances expressive of that kind of holiday enjoyment or mirthfulness which such a

delicious ramble, on such a delicious afternoon, was so eminently calculated to inspire. Rousing abruptly from her series of pleasant naps, Mrs. Bellew noted the signs with some fleeting anxiety, but quickly laid it aside, with the reflection that if she, in her juvenile days, had received an offer from a clergyman at all resembling Mr. Spenser, her feelings would have been far too deep for any outward manifestation of triumph or satisfaction, while it was not unlikely that special gravity and thoughtfulness might be the immediate result, in the rector's case, of the consummation of the hopes he had been cherishing.

Whether David Fletcher, who had eyes to see with as well as Mrs. Bellew, drew any particular conclusions from his observations as regarded the returned wanderers, was not apparent on the surface. He admired their flowers, made quite a luxurious seat for Margaret next to her mother, and then, looking at his watch, wondered with an uncle's natural anxiety why Rhoda and

her cavalier had not yet made their appearance.

The Hall servants came presently to unpack the hamper, and to spread the contents on the smooth grass in front of the oak tree. The gipsy kettle was filled for tea, a crackling fire was lighted under it: everything was looking as cosy and tempting as possible; the two ladies set themselves to the task of cutting cake and bread and butter, the two gentlemen to drawing the corks of one or two bottles of light wine that David had added to the bill of fare; and still there were no signs of the young people.

"They must have lost their way," remarked Mrs. Bellew, thinking little enough of those she was speaking of, but directing furtive glances, from time to time, both at her very quiet daughter and the subdued rector.

"They must have forgotten to look at their watches," said David, restoring his own to his pocket, and then, with a half

frightened start, exclaiming—" But good gracious, here is Mr. Palmer hurrying towards us alone. Surely nothing can have happened to my little Rhoda ! "

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT THE MYSTERIOUS BAG CONTAINED.

DAVID FLETCHER had risen to his feet in the excitement of the moment, and walked a step or two across the greensward to meet the swiftly hurrying curate, who spoke, however, hot and nearly breathless as he was, the instant there was a chance of his voice reaching the waiting party.

“There is nothing the matter,” he called out, “and Miss Meredith will be here directly, only,” added the speaker as he reached the tree, and threw himself, flushed and panting, on the grass, “she discovered it was later than she thought, and sent me on in advance, lest her uncle should be anxious. If there is a draught of water to be

had, I shall be glad of it," continued the young man, in an exhausted tone that scarcely fell short of being an injured one; "and then I will explain what has kept both me and the young lady. By my word, I shall not forget the Dunross woods in a hurry."

"Take a glass of wine," said Mr. Fletcher, who, in common with the rest of the party, was beginning to feel curious on the subject of the yet unrelated adventures of his niece and her escort; "it will revive you sooner than water, and the tea is not quite ready, I am afraid. You look as if you had been running fast and far, though it is hardly a day for violent exercise."

"Nor should I, with my figure," replied the unfortunate curate (I think I have said that he was a little over stout and florid for his years), "*choose* violent exercise at any time. I have literally had no choice on this occasion. Thank you; the wine is undoubtedly reviving. I suspect my heart is not very strong, and—and—" after a brief pause, and looking somewhat dubiously at

Mr. Fletcher, "Miss Meredith is certainly a very remarkable young lady!"

"Well, really, you have excited our curiosity now to the utmost, Mr. Palmer," exclaimed Mrs. Bellew, who, all energy and promptitude herself, had no patience with the slowness or prosiness of her fellow creatures; "and as we shall not get our tea till your story is told, and every minute the sun is losing its warmth, I should advise your coming to the point at once. You will find us most attentive listeners."

As this last clause was added graciously and with a smile, Mr. Palmer was willing to ignore the brusqueness of the beginning. His own answering smile was however rather sickly, though in obedience to the lady's hint he immediately dashed into his narrative, addressing himself chiefly to Rhoda's uncle.

"Well, you know, sir, you were good enough to entrust your niece to my charge, and I, on my part, was most anxious to promote the young lady's enjoyment and to do the honours of the woods to her. I thought

I was familiar with all their circuitous windings and turnings, and after bringing her to this spot, just to show her the place of meeting, we took one of the paths leading, by a gradual ascent, to Hartsleap Well, which I thought she would like to see, and on the road to which are the large stone-edge quarries. We were getting along very nicely, and Miss Meredith seemed to be delighting in the singing of the birds, and the beauty and variety of the trees ; and she had been telling me how much less she knew of the country than of London, and asking me about my parish work ; and I had been chaffing her a little about her heavy and capacious bag, and trying to guess at its contents—we were very merry and happy together, you see—when suddenly there was the sound of blasting up above amongst the quarries, and the young lady stopping short, wanted to know what it meant. When I explained, she said quickly, ‘ Oh then, there will be men—workmen, I mean—assembled in the place from which the noise came, and perhaps some of the wives and families ?’ I

answered that it was not unlikely, as I had seen women bringing their husbands' dinners to them in the quarries, and very often, on fine days, the children came and played about when there was no dangerous blasting going on. 'And how do we get up?' was Miss Meredith's next question, asked eagerly, and with evident interest. I told her we should pass very near the quarries by continuing our present pathway—at least such was my belief—but that expert climbers could find a more direct ascent up a very steep and stony by-road, half covered with dwarf thorn bushes, which we should see to our right in a minute or two. 'Then hand me my bag,' exclaimed my companion, 'and I will try the nearest way. You can join me later, as I daresay steep climbing is not much to your taste.' I give you my honour, sir, I had no time to remonstrate, scarcely time to take in the young lady's meaning, when she was half way up the terrific road in question, leaving me stupefied, bewildered, and, if I must confess the truth, not a little put out, at the bottom.

“Of course, my first idea was to follow my charge, at all risks ; and I did try, sir—I give you my solemn word, I did try—to scale that abominable and preposterous hill. I went up a tolerably stiff bit of it, tearing my clothes (begging pardon of the ladies), and losing my breath with each step I took, and, as I need not tell you, having lost sight of Miss Rhoda at the very beginning. At last I had to abandon all hope of ever reaching the quarries by that route ; and, firmly believing that I knew the longer and easier way, I retraced my footsteps as fast as I could, never doubting that, in a quarter of an hour, I should be beside my runaway companion again.

“Well, sir, to make a long story short—for I fear I am tiring you all—I went on and on and on, always mounting gradually, but never finding the quarries. By-and-by, suspecting I had got into a wrong path, I struck into another which proved to be wrong likewise. Then I tried a third, with no better success ; then, growing desperate, and nearly exhausted with my fruitless

efforts, I dashed amongst the pathless trees and brushwood, and, striking higher than I had hitherto done, came, in the end, to the place I was in search of.

“And now let me try to forget myself and my own sufferings, that I may describe the scene I beheld.

“There were, perhaps, about a score of men, in all, gathered together under the shelter of the rocks, and there may have been half a dozen women, and rather more than that number of children. Most of the men had got tracts in their hands, and some of the women and children little bright-covered books; but as I arrived on the scene, they were all giving a seemingly close and most respectful attention to the young lady who, with her back to me, was seated on a block of stone, reading a gospel story aloud to her very queer but picturesque-looking audience. As my arrival disturbed nobody (Miss Meredith, of course, not being aware of it), I was soon able to take more accurate observations; and I saw then that the young lady had a very small, and, I must confess, grubby

little child, on either knee, who were both eagerly devouring sweets of some kind. I also perceived that the mothers, in addition to the diminutive books, had become the happy possessors of diminutive garments, of a mixed, and to me, as a bachelor, indescribable form and texture, though what I took to be knitted shoes and socks were conspicuous amongst them. When I add that upon the whole of this strange company the evening sun was shining brilliantly, you may imagine what a deeply effective and interesting picture I was privileged to behold. I was quite vexed when one of the children, becoming aware of my presence, uttered an exclamation, and abruptly stopped the beautiful reading. Of course, then, I had to go forward and offer some explanation to Miss Rhoda of my tardy appearance, but she only said, in her quiet way, 'I don't think I was expecting you. I found out my day's work, you see, and I have been very happy.' I ventured to remind the young lady how late it was growing, and then she asked me to hasten on first, while

she finished her chapter, and bade good-bye to her new friends, and I immediately obeyed her. I would have carried the empty bag down the hill for her, but she said she was going to pick up a few fossils, as mementos of the delightful afternoon she had spent in the Dunross woods. I was irresistibly reminded by this of the old proverb," concluded the exhausted curate, lugubriously, "'What is one man's meat is another man's poison.' For, as I remarked in the beginning, I shall not forget the Dunross woods in a hurry."

"Well, it has been a most exciting narrative, I am sure," commented Mrs. Bellew, as the young man ceased speaking, and David Fletcher was smiling amusedly and complacently to himself. "Miss Meredith must be indeed a most singular and independent young lady—such a mere child as she looks too! In my juvenile days unmarried females never thought of working in that way, except under the special direction and guidance of the clergyman of their parish."

This being manifestly a sop to the re-

verend gentleman seated so gravely and silently at her right hand, the Rector of Ditchley could do no less than reply to it.

“Young women in the present day,” he said, with a half smile of infinite compassion, “are far in advance of their lawful spiritual guides in everything. Miss Meredith, however, is away from her own parish here, and therefore we will not set her down as amongst the wilful and self-sufficient ones. We will only call her a very amiable and interesting enthusiast.”

Margaret fancied she detected a covert sneer in these plausible words, and, seeing that David’s cheek flushed a little as they were spoken, her own spirit of partizanship impelled her to say warmly—

“We may call her what we like, but I think the fact remains that she is also a very diligent and earnest worker; and though, unfortunately, I have no vocation in that direction myself, I cannot help warmly admiring such zeal and philanthropy as Miss Meredith’s.”

“Oh! I am sure it is beyond all praise,”

exclaimed the young Curate, who really did appear to have been greatly impressed by what he had that afternoon witnessed ; " and I should like, above everything, to hear Miss Rhoda relate some of her City experiences. I have no doubt she could put to the blush half the regular clergymen about London, or the country either, for that matter."

" My little niece does not care to talk of what she does for love's sake," said David Fletcher, who began to think that this discussion had been sufficiently prolonged ; " and, if I mistake not, I can see her in the distance amongst the trees, and will go and meet her."

" No, let me go, please," said Margaret, jumping up, and seeming quite glad to be moving again (the solemn Rector was sitting very near her). " You, Mr. Fletcher, have your duties as host-in-chief to attend to. Miss Meredith will surely be ready for her tea when she arrives."

But Rhoda would confess to no fatigue at all, and certainly she looked of the whole

party the happiest and the brightest, while the pleasant gipsy-meal 'was going on. Once Mrs. Bellew asked her, with a touch of perhaps unconscious sarcasm, how it was she had come to fill her bag with precisely the kind of articles which had suited the rough gentry she had so very accidentally encountered. Had she known intuitively that the Dunross woods would furnish her with needy and grateful recipients of her varied bounties?

"Oh! indeed, I had no intuitions," answered Rhoda, with that straightforward simplicity which should have disarmed the satirical propensities of the very demon of satire. "I usually carry my big bag with me when I am going to any new place. I inquired of my London landlady, who had lived in the country many years, what sort of things I had better take with me to Ditchley to give away to any chance poor people I might find, and she said babies' clothes never came amiss, as there were sure to be babies everywhere. The tracts, and books, and sugar-plums are my staple com-

modities. It is so easy to gain the parents' ears and reach their hearts through the little children."

This explanation, so modestly and frankly given, silenced everybody. Even Mr. Spenser glanced up, with a momentary interest, at the young girl who evidently could conceive of no pleasure in life apart from that of ministering to the wants of her fellow-creatures, while the Curate, recovered now from his exhaustion, and consequently free to receive novel impressions, began to look upon his own easy life and labours with sickening contempt, and to suspect that the somewhat dowdy little girl in spectacles, with whom he had been walking and talking familiarly an hour ago, must be an angel in disguise sent down direct from Heaven.

In the meanwhile, the prosaic business of eating and drinking was satisfactorily concluded, and the three ladies volunteered their assistance in clearing and packing up the china, glass, and spoons that had been used for the feast.

"For it is high time we were moving," remarked Mrs. Bellew, with an introductory shiver, while she still kept a vigilant watch upon the subdued rector and her daughter. "We have a good half-hour's walk yet, before we get to the inn and the carriage; and my knees are beginning to feel a little stiff."

"Then, pray, my dear lady," exclaimed David, who felt that now was his last chance, "don't incur the risk of sitting or standing still, a moment longer. Mr. Spenser will, I am sure, be happy to give you his arm, and you can walk leisurely in the direction of our inn, kindly hastening on my men, should you meet them, to relieve us who are remaining from the charge of this scattered property."

To assert that either the rector, thus coolly disposed of, or Mrs. Bellew, ordered off with a pretence of courteous anxiety about her health, looked gratefully or lovingly at David as he spoke, would be going very far beyond the truth. But they were both sufficiently past the age of impulse to avoid

betraying their annoyance and anger ; so Mr. Spenser rose, with much dignity, and helped Mrs. Bellew from her sitting posture, while that lady, gathering her warm shawl about her with a second shiver, said, looking significantly at Margaret, though professedly addressing the whole party—

“I should strongly advise your all following us as quickly as possible. The evening will be very cold, and I have a great objection to dawdling about at road-side inns.”

CHAPTER XVII.

DESTRUCTION OF AN AIR CASTLE.

WHEN the two remaining couples had fairly started (Margaret and Rhoda, assisted by the gentlemen, had nearly finished their work by the time the Hall servants arrived), David Fletcher having told his niece and Mr. Palmer to hurry on first, and explain their detention to Mrs. Bellew, said, a little sadly and reproachfully, addressing his own companion—

“I should have had nothing of you to-day, after all, but for my bold manœuvre just now. Did you forget your promise?”

“By no means,” laughed Margaret, and because she laughed poor David had a tormenting doubt as to whether she was in jest

or earnest. "I had provided for its due fulfilment, by dropping one of my gloves while I was with that stately rector. I meant to ask you, on the ground of your having had less walking than the rest of us, to go a short way back with me to look for it. Of course I knew exactly where it was—I had reckoned that it would be just a nice distance for a stroll after tea—but my mother being in such a desperate hurry to get off, quite upset my innocent little scheme. If you don't believe me, see, here is my gloveless hand," for David was looking keenly and wistfully into the merry face of the speaker, with some incredulity expressed in his own—"and they were new ones too, put on in honour of the day"—she added, in a tone of assumed sorrow for her loss—"therefore, so far from reproaching me, you ought to be especially grateful on account of the sacrifice I made in remembrance of my promise. I shall have to hide this poor uncovered hand under my shawl till I get home."

David's heart was beating fast and thickly

He longed, with a very agony of longing, to take that white hand into his warm clasp, and to tell its possessor that she had grown to be more to him than all the world. But besides the fact that he doubted whether the time were ripe for such an avowal, and that he knew he should, on the eve of deciding his fate, whenever that eve arrived, have a thousand doubts and apprehensions, born of his past life's miserable experience, to harass and hold him back—besides all this, there was something in the sparkling lightness and joyousness of Margaret's mood, as they walked slowly together through those silent pathways, that forbade any very near approach to sentimentality.

Margaret Bellew loved to be with David Fletcher, gloried in the belief that her simple presence was beginning to confer a strange new happiness upon him; but she was in no hurry to have the existing relations between them altered in any way, and even had it been otherwise, she was not enough of a coquette to drive one admirer to the verge

of despair, and raise another to the height of felicity, on the same evening.

So when David, in reply to her laughing demand upon his gratitude, ventured to thank her in somewhat ardent tones, and to lay one light, half caressing touch upon the ungloved hand that had not yet retreated to its threatened place of hiding, Margaret, with ready tact, found something for the hand to do which removed it from its dangerous position on her companion's arm, and, hastening her steps a little, said Mrs. Bellew would be impatient,—adding, as a very soft and unobtrusive sigh reached her ear—

“But now do tell me, as we go, something more about that rare niece of yours, who has certainly been the heroine of the day, and is so bright an example to all of us.”

She knew or guessed that, after the one subject nearest to his heart, there was nothing David Fletcher would enjoy talking about more than Rhoda—the simple little girl who had come so abruptly and un-

expectedly to gladden his lonely life, and to change, in fact, the sad and troubled current of that life altogether. For it is doubtful whether but for the discovery that Rhoda Meredith could bestow upon him a ready and warm affection this poor crushed David would ever have brought himself to believe in the possibility of a woman like Margaret Bellew looking upon him with complacency. It is even doubtful whether the intercourse between the Hall and Abbotsmead would have progressed in any degree but for the feminine element introduced into the former, which gave Mrs. Bellew no excuse for coldness or prudery as regarded the visits of their wifeless neighbour.

The spring twilight was fast creeping on by the time Mr. Fletcher and Margaret reached the inn and the rest of their party. David could not walk fast, by reason of his lameness, and certainly he had not cared to hurry his pace on this special occasion. It seemed a very small matter to him, weighed against the happiness he had experienced in Margaret's society, that Mrs. Bellew should

look black and speak snappishly to everybody, when she condescended to open her lips at all, during the rapid drive home. To one who had been a martyr during long years to the tyranny of a wife from whom there was no escape, any other domestic tyranny must necessarily appear a trifle. He guessed too that Margaret had a spirit which might, under extreme provocation, look out and assert itself even from those dove-like eyes ; and over and above all else he hugged to his beating heart the thought that ere long he should gain courage to say to the sweet woman he loved so utterly—“Come home to me, and give me a chance of making your whole life a summer holiday.”

This is indeed what poor impulsive tender-hearted David would have gloried in doing, what perhaps, in the greatness and exclusiveness of his devotion, he really believed he *could* do ; but he forgot in his enthusiasm and romance that life must have more shadows than sunshine, even for the best beloved, and I think he forgot too, for the

time being, the existence and near relationship to himself of a certain beautiful young lady, called amongst mortals—Elizabeth Fletcher.

Mrs. Bellew doubtless judged that it would be an idle compliment to ask any of their companions to make a halt at Abbotsmead, as it was so late when they arrived there, and she, at least, had said so much about being tired. Anyhow, she did not do it, and her only smiles, and these very dubious ones, were for the ultra polite rector, when he again dismounted for the purpose of handing herself and daughter from the carriage. She did, with an apparent effort, say a few words of thanks to Mr. Fletcher for the pleasant drive he had given them, and for his hospitality generally, but beyond this her adieu to that gentleman and his niece were of the coldest, and Margaret, as she followed her mother into the house, saw descending fast that dark and cruel extinguisher which malignant destiny has such a trick of clapping down upon the heads of poor mortals, after

a day, or even an hour, of unwonted enjoyment.

“Half-past eight o’clock!” in the jerky, irritating voice which was always the prelude to something worse, sounded now the key-note to the coming discord—“A pretty time of day for respectable gentlewomen to be gallivanting with a parcel of men who are scarcely more than strangers to them. I should have thought, Miss Margaret, that my training and example for thirty years would have secured you against the gross impropriety of lingering in a lonely wood till nearly dark with a single man who bears the character, too, though you may not have heard it, of being somewhat over fond of ladies. I am sure I began to think you were never coming, and but that he saw I was ready to cry for shame on your account, Mr. Spenser would have made some remark, as your pastor. He does not hold too high an opinion of David Fletcher, I can tell you.”

“*Don’t* tell me, however, please,” interrupted Margaret, extreme paleness the only sign of excitement or anger she betrayed; “or

I shall hold a still less high opinion of your friend, the rector, than I do at present. Your arrows, though carefully poisoned, have been shot too far above my head to graze so much as my little finger. You know as well as I do, that it was not even approaching to dark when we joined you at the inn, and you know, also, that Mr. Fletcher is lame and that we were all detained in the first instance by the non-arrival of his lazy servants. Shall I ring for Priscilla to bring you a candle, or will you take off your things by the remaining daylight?"

"I want no candle," was the quick reply, "for I shall not come down again to-night. It is too late to begin working, and I am tired enough, goodness knows! to make bed endurable an hour or so in advance. You can please yourself about sitting up, only don't make a noise on the piano, as I shall want to go to sleep if I can."

Mrs. Bellew still spoke petulantly and sharply; but Margaret fancied that, through the petulance and sharpness, there was an unusual tone of real weariness and depres-

sion, and being in her heart sincerely attached to her mother (in spite of all their outward antagonism) she repented instantly of the coldness and wrathfulness of her own words, and hastened to make atonement for them as best she could.

"Mamma," — (this was an appellation Margaret rarely used, and never unless her mood was an especially tender one)—
"Mamma, I am afraid you are not feeling well. You may perhaps have taken cold from sitting in the open air so long. Do let me bring you a cup of warm coffee or chocolate when you are in bed; and then, if you will let me, I will stay and read to you."

Whether Mrs. Bellew, in the secret recesses of her soul, appreciated this affectionate consideration on the part of her daughter, must be left an open question. Possibly, as she was not wholly destitute of warm and kindly feelings herself, she did; but it was not in the woman's nature to give the slightest evidence of being touched or grateful at any manifestation of an unusual and exceptional

kind. She only laughed sarcastically and disagreeably, as she answered—

“I am not ill at all, thank you ; and if I were, when did you ever know me indulge myself by taking anything hot in bed? I made a very good substantial tea, and shall certainly require no more food or drink till breakfast time to-morrow morning. As for being read to in bed, I believe it would give me St. Vitus’s dance. We go to bed to sleep, according to *my* view of the matter, though the present generation is teaching me a variety of things of which my own limited education left me deplorably ignorant.”

“Then good night,” said Margaret quietly and sadly ; “since I can do nothing for you. I will not touch the piano, and you may be sure I shall not sit up late by myself ; indeed, I am tired too.”

She *was* tired, but it was more mental than physical weariness. Pacing restlessly their large dining-room, lighted by a feeble lamp, when she was left alone, Margaret Bellew must be forgiven if she thought, with some bitterness, that any life where her energies

might be developed, where her tenderness would be appreciated, where all the latent powers of her nature, so long repressed and kept down, would have a chance of being turned to profitable account, would be a welcome and a blessed change from the dead flat existence she had led so long. As a wife she would at least have definite and pleasant duties, and not be forbidden to perform them. She might hope to enjoy the privilege, hitherto wholly denied her, of ministering to the wants, of soothing the cares, of sharing the enjoyments, of the companion of her daily life. Even as a step-mother, Margaret Bellw felt that there would be work, healthy, exciting, ennobling work for her to do ; and although a thousand anxieties and annoyances, which as yet her inexperienced eyes could not discern, might and probably would accompany all the duties of the new life she was seeing as in a vision, still it *would* be life instead of stagnation, and she herself a breathing, living, acting human creature, instead of an utterly useless nonentity in the wide universe.

There was no doubt a great deal of justification, in the hard facts of the case, for Margaret's dissatisfaction and secret rebellion against her past and present destiny. Mrs. Bellew, living and moving herself in one narrow groove, could not conceive the possibility of any other mortal, especially of any mortal woman, requiring a broader and freer sphere of thought and action. Her argument would have been, if called upon, which she never was, to argue the matter,—why should not the round of common duties which sufficed to fill and complete *her* life, suffice to fill and complete the life of her daughter? If, indeed, there was anything so odd and eccentric in the nature of the latter as to make these quiet womanly duties inadequate to her contentment, then surely she was bound to look upon her own moral state with suspicion and mistrust, to fight against, and, in the end, to conquer its disloyalty. Such, I repeat, would have been Mrs. Bellew's reasoning, had reasoning on the subject ever come in her way. It was therefore, natural enough that a mind like

this and a mind like her daughter's should run ever in straight, parallel lines, without the shadow of a chance of their approaching a hair's breadth nearer to each other.

But just to-night, I am sure, Margaret would have indulged in less bitterness and more pitying tenderness of feeling towards her mother, had she known that, instead of sleeping, Mrs. Bellew was lying wide awake, and mourning very sincerely, and with all the strength of her hard, reserved nature, over the certain toppling down, which she now plainly foresaw, of the only airy castle she had built since those early days when she had looked, through dry eyes but with an aching heart, at her first innocent structure in hopeless ruins.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LAST APPEAL.

WHATEVER amount of snubbing or discouragement the Reverend Augustus Spenser might have encountered at the hands of the fair lady he was desirous of placing at the head of his comfortable establishment, it did not hinder him from sending a very polite message to Abbotsmead the next morning, inquiring, with his compliments, how both the ladies were, in the first place, and in the second place, adding that he intended doing himself the honour of calling on Mrs. Bellew early in the afternoon.

Poor Mrs. Bellew! Her hopes were too utterly crushed and lifeless to have even

galvanic animation infused into them by this courteous and pleasant message, which, two days ago, would have given her such heartfelt satisfaction. She had gone about her usual duties with a sadly unelastic step all the morning; she had been freezingly civil to Margaret (who was depressed too, probably from the natural reaction of her yesterday's buoyancy); and she had subsequently plied her needle with mechanical industry, but with a total absence of that brisk energy which always seemed a very part of herself.

"My compliments and thanks to Mr. Spenser, and I shall be most happy to see him," had been the message she gave to Priscilla to transmit to the rectory footman, but no comment escaped her tightly shut lips when she was again left alone with her daughter, and Margaret could only judge by the lowering expression of the bending face, and by the way in which the needle and thread continued to be jerked out, of the serious discomposure of her mother's mind.

It was about eleven o'clock when Mr. Spenser's servant had made his appearance at Abbotsmead. At exactly a quarter to twelve Priscilla obtruded her stolid visage into the dining-room for one instant, to announce that the Hall carriage was just driving up to the door. The baker's boy had brought the news as he came in with bread from Ditchley.

"That man again!" exclaimed Mrs. Bellew, with suddenly flaming cheeks, and all her melancholy replaced, for the moment, by genuine anger and annoyance. "What can he possibly want at this hour of the day? I won't see him, you know, that's certain. I consider people take a very great liberty in calling on me in the morning."

Margaret, who had flushed also, though in a milder degree than her companion, replied, unexcitedly—

"It will probably be only Miss Meredith, and the visit to me, not you. Nobody expects to find the mistress of a house disengaged before the afternoon."

"Whether they do or not," snapped the

elder lady, 'apparently quite relieved at having some open and legitimate excuse for irritation—"they won't get me to receive them. Priscilla knows too well what she is about to bring morning callers in here. It's lucky for you that you have time to waste with such miserable idlers."

The miserable idler in this instance turning out to be Rhoda Meredith, Margaret could scarcely suppress a laugh as she left her irate parent to her grumblings, and went into the drawing-room to welcome her guest.

After the most cordial greetings had been exchanged, Rhoda told her errand—

"I have brought you some flowers on my own account," she said, exhibiting a bouquet fully equal to the one the Rector had sent on the previous day, "and of course Uncle David was anxious to hear how you both were after the fatigue of yesterday—Had we not a delightful expedition? I am sure I shall never forget it—but the real object of my visit is to bring you and your mamma an invitation to lunch at the Hall the first

day Mrs. Bellew thinks it fine enough to drive so far. The carriage shall fetch you early, uncle says, so that there may be ample time for going over the grounds. He would have proposed your coming to dinner, only your mamma told him yesterday she did not like being out late—and besides this”—added the speaker, whose budget was clearly not emptied yet, “you will be earnestly urged to dine at the Hall later, for, to our unbounded astonishment—Uncle David’s and mine—we had a letter from my cousin Elizabeth Fletcher this morning, announcing that they are returning to England in a fortnight or three weeks, and that mamma proposes herself restoring her nieces to their father’s protection, and taking the opportunity of spending a short time with them and her brother-in-law at the Hall. Of course I shall have to return with her, though nothing is said of this yet, but Uncle David is good enough to express sorrow at the thought of losing me, and between ourselves, I am afraid Elizabeth’s letter has somewhat disturbed him altogether. He has lived the life of a

hermit so long that I can imagine what it must feel like to be told suddenly he has got to receive and entertain a fashionable London lady, who is nearly a stranger to him. But how I am chattering, dear Miss Bellew, without remembering that I have come at an unseasonable hour, and that your time in the morning may be precious.—Will you speak to Mrs. Bellew about my uncle's message at once, or shall I leave it with you to deliver when you think best? An answer could come, you know, by post."

Margaret was thankful that Rhoda had talked so long after first broaching the matter of the invitation to lunch. She wanted time to debate the very perplexing question with herself, to consider how she could, in her answer, avoid sacrificing truth, and yet be unenlightening to Rhoda's intelligent mind. When, at last, she was compelled to speak, she said hesitatingly, and with a little blush—

"I shall prefer your leaving Mr. Fletcher's kind message with me. My mother is not in an especially propitious mood this morn-

ing—she never is after a day's holiday—and I am nearly sure, if she were consulted now, her reply would be a point blank refusal. I am almost afraid it will be this, in any case," added Margaret, sorrowfully, but feeling it best to warn her friends of what she believed inevitable, "for my mother has led quite as hermit-like a life as your uncle, and any divergence from her usual habits seems to be real torture to her. You will thank Mr. Fletcher warmly from me, won't you? and say that, as far as *I* am concerned, a few hours spent at the Hall, and in seeing the beautiful grounds, would be a very great delight to me."

"Oh, you must come, you know," replied simple, straightforward Rhoda, who had never had the advantage of studying a character in any way resembling that of Margaret's mother; "Uncle David has quite set his heart upon it, and I do so want you to see the dear old place. I am sure you can manage it with a little coaxing—Mrs. Bellew has such kind eyes—and when once she has broken the ice, she will not mind coming

again—only I *should* like—and so would uncle—to have you both wholly to ourselves for this first time. My cousin Elizabeth is rather cold and proud, and I am afraid she will not make the home so cheerful and pleasant as it ought to be.”

Margaret wondered, in reflecting upon this last remark after her visitor had gone, whether Rhoda could have had any private object in speaking thus of her eldest cousin, whether, in the warmth and kindness of her own heart, and guessing at the possibility of Uncle David seeking by-and-by to bring some brighter element into his life, she had desired to warn her new friend of the one certain shadow that would darken any sunshine to be found and enjoyed in David Fletcher’s home.

If such had been Rhoda Meredith’s object, Margaret could appreciate it, and even feel grateful towards her; but as for being influenced by it, that was quite another matter. Half a hundred Elizabeth Fletchers (it must be remembered that she did not as yet know the individual in question) would not have

turned aside the steps of this dauntless young woman from the path her steadfast eyes were now for ever contemplating, and towards which her heart, with all its unwasted riches of affection, was strongly yearning.

"And pray what did your early visitor want?" said Mrs. Bellew ungraciously, as her daughter, on Rhoda's departure, went back to the dining-room and laid the gorgeous bouquet on the table. "Those are very fine flowers, I admit, but it would have been scarcely worth while to have out the Hall carriage just to bring you a nosegay. We shall have a surfeit of these things by-and-by."

"We can never have too many flowers, I think," replied Margaret, keeping her temper, and abruptly deciding to have the explosion she anticipated over at once; "but Miss Meredith did not, as you rightly conjecture, come this morning only to bring me the bouquet,—which was just a little graceful offering of her own;—she came with a message from her uncle to you."

"Indeed!" with a sarcastic laugh, that had behind it an unmistakable frown. "And what may that be? The great gentleman of the Hall does me too much honour, I am sure. I wait to hear what so distinguished an individual can possibly want of a humble body like myself?"

Though wincing under the ungenerous satire of these words, Margaret replied composedly—

"He wants us both to go and lunch at the Hall some day, any day that you yourself might choose, when it would be fine enough to enjoy a walk in the grounds. I told Miss Meredith, however, that you scarcely ever went out, and that I did not think there was much probability of your accepting the invitation."

"Then I must say," fired Mrs. Bellew, whose natural love of going counter to those about her had evidently received an extraordinary impetus this morning, "that you have taken more upon yourself, Miss Margaret, than I have ever justified you in doing. If I dislike my neighbours, that is

no reason why I should be rude to them. Mr. Fletcher spoke yesterday of showing me his grounds, and politeness obliged me to reply that I should be glad to see them. Of course I shall accept the invitation, when it is formally sent to me, to lunch at the Hall."

Margaret was wise enough to hold her tongue, and to be thankful. She dispatched a little note, by post, to Rhoda that evening, and was satisfied when this was done to let things take their course.

Mr. Spenser arrived early, as he had announced his intention of doing, but Mrs. Bellew was dressed and quite ready to receive the reverend gentleman in the drawing-room. Margaret left them to their tête-à-tête of three-quarters of an hour, and would not have gone down at all had not Mrs. Bellew sent for her at the end of that time, rising herself and preparing to leave the apartment as her daughter entered it.

It was but a forlorn hope that had brought the Rector of Ditchley to Abbotsmead this afternoon, and it was a sign of

his being very much in earnest that, with all his dignity and self esteem, he had not shrunk from the probably humiliating ordeal. He had no doubt reckoned a little more than he should have done on maternal influence and persuasion; he had, in point of fact, believed Margaret many years younger than she actually was; but her extreme gentleness and sweetness, now that the crisis had come, while they heightened his regret at losing her, entirely disarmed his anger, and there was one moment in the brief interview when Margaret herself was touched and softened visibly. It was when the rejected suitor, in reply to the lady's assertion that she should have made a wretched helpmate for a clergyman, said sorrowfully and reproachfully—

“It was a wife for myself I was seeking, not a rectoress for my parish; but a man who has lived alone and unloved all the years I have, may contrive to do so, I suppose, to the end of the chapter.”

They parted soon after this on grave though not unfriendly terms, and Mr. Spenser

expressed a hope that by-and-by—(he should probably leave Ditchley for a short time)—but that by-and-by he might be permitted to visit at Abbotsmead as usual.

Margaret, seeing no earthly reason against it, assured him that both to her mother and herself he would ever be a welcome guest.

And then the curtain fell on that slight episode of Margaret Bellew's dull life, and possibly no one except Mrs. Bellew was, for any lengthened period, seriously affected by what had happened.

That lady never asked her daughter a single question, made no comment on the Rector's visit, nor on his subsequent short absence from his parish; but she was snow and ice to Margaret for many dreary days, and, over and above this, she went about her ordinary duties with a heavy step and a spiritless manner, that told plainly enough she was taking the loss of a clerical son-in-law very seriously to heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARGARET AT THE CEMETERY.

THE hint which Margaret had contrived to convey in her note to Rhoda was promptly acted on by Rhoda's uncle, who forthwith wrote himself a ceremonious though friendly letter to Mrs. Bellew, reminding her of her promise to go and see his grounds, and suggesting that the weather just now was all that could be desired. They would lunch at any hour that might be most agreeable to herself, and the carriage should be sent for her and her daughter precisely at the time she might appoint also.

"Here, you had better answer this at once," said the recipient of the gracious invitation, tossing David's note across the table

to Margaret. "And as there's clearly no getting out of the visit which my own weakness has entailed upon me, you may name Tuesday of next week for our going up there—only I won't have that man's carriage sent for me," added the speaker in her sharpest and most biting tones. "There are conveyances, I presume, to be got in Ditchley, miserable little hole of a place as it is! and I shall choose to hire one for myself if I am to go out at all."

Now as hiring conveyances, except under the most exceptional and inevitable circumstances, was wholly foreign to Mrs. Bellew's habits, was indeed prominent amongst the extravagances she had always deprecated, Margaret was naturally a good deal astonished at what she heard; but the coolness still existing between her mother and herself forbidding remarks that might give additional offence, she only said, half nervously—

"How do you wish me to put your refusal of the carriage? It will be rather difficult to do it nicely, won't it? the offer being

made in so friendly and neighbourly a spirit."

"Not in the least difficult," was the quick, uncompromising answer; "merely say that I am extremely obliged, but that I prefer hiring a fly from Ditchley. If Mr. Fletcher has the instincts of a gentleman, he will understand the matter—if he has not, he is scarcely worth considering."

This being all that Margaret could obtain, she sat down and wrote a letter to David, as well as she could under the embarrassing circumstances, in Mrs. Bellew's name; and then she went about her usual avocations with a quiet serenity of spirit, a confident trust in what was coming to her through the mystic silence of the approaching days, that took nearly all the weariness and quite all the bitterness out of the dull monotony of the present slowly passing hours.

Sunday proved the most trying of the days that had, as yet, succeeded the rejection of Mr. Spenser's proposals.

The ladies of Abbotsmead went to church as usual—Mrs. Bellew never neglected the

rigid observance of her outward religious duties, and indeed there was every reason to conclude that she enjoyed the performance of them fully as much as she enjoyed the methodical drudgery of her six working days—but the absence of the rector, though she had been partly prepared for it, was a test against which neither her spirits nor her temper was by any means proof. She disliked extremely the somewhat gloomy, hyper-evangelicism of the Reverend Caleb Jones, the senior curate of Ditchley, who took advantage—at least so Mrs. Bellew declared—of his rector's absence, to preach an unreasonably long and unreasonably solemn and warning sermon. Then she was positively certain that a great part of the congregation stared at Margaret, with cold inquisitive glances, as if they guessed what had happened, and deeply resented a stranger's having first won, and then calmly put aside, the affections of their esteemed and honoured pastor, exiling him from his church and admiring flock, at a season of the year when they were not accustomed to miss the familiar face and voice.

But even these two sources of annoyance and irritation, which poor injured Mrs. Bellew harped upon, to her daughter's distraction, the whole afternoon and evening, were light and trivial compared to her third grievance, which consisted in David Fletcher joining them as they left the church, and, while he coolly palmed off his niece upon the mother, offering his arm to the daughter in presence of the entire congregation, and as Mrs. Bellew not very flatteringly expressed it) limping, like a lame duck, beside her, all down the open public road for three parts of the way home.

Margaret endured the persistent dropping of this very chilling rain with admirable patience for several hours, during which, however, she found it impossible to read, or to keep her thoughts fixed on any Sabbath subject of a profitable kind. But towards evening her own spirits began to flag, and when the early tea was over, and Mrs. Bellew (who always sent Priscilla to church at night, and stayed at home herself, expecting her daughter to stay with her) seemed pre-

paring for a renewed attack, her worn out victim abruptly exclaimed—

“My good mother, if you have anything else disagreeable to say, you must be content to say it to these venerable walls, for I am going out. You have effectually destroyed for me any possibility of enjoying church, so I shall try, for once, to get as far as the cemetery.”

Utter and unmitigated astonishment at the boldness and independence of this announcement deprived Mrs. Bellew of the powers of speech for a minute or two. When she found her tongue, it was to say, while the eyes which Rhoda had called “kind” flashed forth some rather unkindly fires,

“You will, of course, please yourself, Miss Margaret, as indeed you have taken to do in a most filial and dutiful way of late. I am glad you have chosen the cemetery as the terminus of your evening promenade. You may chance to hit upon some useful and suggestive thoughts if you select for your resting place the late Mrs. Fletcher’s grave.”

As no reply that could have brought satisfaction to either of the disputants, at any rate in remembrance, occurred to Margaret at the moment, she allowed this cutting speech to pass, and went, with a quiet step, though sorely chafed spirit, to prepare for her solitary ramble.

It was a long and continuously uphill road to the cemetery, which Margaret really wanted to visit, having only seen it in driving by the entrance gates as yet. The spring evening was tolerably far advanced when she arrived at the end of her walk, and, yearning for quiet, she was somewhat disappointed at finding the sombre burying ground nearly full of loungers, most of them either in couples or parties of three or four, and all talking and laughing gaily, in utter insensibility to the presumed solemnizing influence of the homes of the dead scattered all around them.

Feeling keenly the uncongeniality of such companions as these, Margaret soon made her way to the upper ground, and the avenues of dark cypresses, where the idlers

were comparatively few, and the whole shaded atmosphere in greater harmony with her present thoughts and emotions. Mrs. Bellew had spoken sarcastically, and with intent to wound, when she had advised her daughter to choose the grave of the late Mrs. Fletcher for her place of repose, but Margaret did choose it nevertheless, having a conscientious, if perhaps somewhat romantic, desire to talk with her own heart in this most suggestive spot, as well as to picture, in the most vivid way she could (gazing dreamily at that cold marble which told only that "Ellinor Elizabeth Fletcher, wife of David Fletcher, of Ditchley, aged thirty-seven," slept beneath), the life those two had led together, and the actual result which his past sufferings had left upon the mind and character of the widowed husband. The widowed husband to whose solace and happiness she had firmly resolved, if the chance were given her, to devote the whole of her own life, and strength, and energy.

And standing now, in this still twilight hour, amongst the whispering cypresses,

by his dead wife's grave, Margaret Bellew, realizing more forcibly and intensely than she had ever yet done (for her imagination was quickened by the scene and all its impressive associations) what David Fletcher must have endured in a loveless atmosphere of eighteen long years,—seeing, as in a vision, the depth of the dark waters through which he had fought and struggled—Margaret Bellew, I say, did then and there vow to herself a solemn vow to make his happiness, his peace of mind, his comfort, if she became his wife, always her first care, her strongest endeavour, her holiest duty.

This woman of gentle temper and specially tender heart, who had passed through nearly half her span of days without awaking to the consciousness that there was anything definite, amidst the work of the great toiling universe, that her feeble hands could do, awoke now to look with clear and hopeful eyes upon what she had the most absolute conviction was her appointed task in life; awoke, too, to recognize it as one of probable difficulty and trial and self-denial, but woman-

like to welcome and to love it, in anticipation, all the more on this account.

Let us trust, in Margaret's case at least, to look upwards also for a strength and help which even natural religion must have taught her she could not do without, and which it scarcely needed a prophet's vision to foretel that any wife of David Fletcher would have an urgent need of.

Mrs. Bellew's bitter and angry mood appeared to have exhausted itself by the time her daughter arrived at home. At any rate, she received her with a civil welcome, and even a few words of inquiry as to how she had liked the cemetery—and Margaret, thankful for peace on any terms, answered gently and affectionately, and then, seeing that loneliness had made her mother drowsy, went to the piano and softly hymned her into a quiet nap till their early and frugal supper was announced.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WIDOWER IN SEARCH OF A WIFE.

THE Tuesday fixed for the visit to the Hall did not prove an especially fine day; but as there was neither rain nor an east wind, both of which Mrs. Bellew had alternately predicted during the whole of Monday, that lady had no excuse for deferring her engagement. She had said, indeed, at breakfast time that she should be delighted to have it over, thanking Heaven, with marked emphasis, that she had never in her youngest days been a gad-about, and earnestly hoping that there would be an end, after this, of people expecting her to go to their houses.

Margaret had not breathed a word to her mother concerning what Rhoda had told her

of the anticipated arrivals at the Hall, and it will occasion no surprise to hear that she kept her own counsel on the subject now. Time enough, she thought, for extra protestations and grumblings when any fresh invitations came to hand. The experiences of to-day might make the future course of all parties clearer and straighter, even if the road opened to them was not altogether to their taste.

The hired carriage arrived from Ditchley with noteworthy punctuality, and as Mrs. Bellew hated being kept waiting, when once she was dressed to go out, this circumstance helped to put her in a very tolerably good temper at starting. Perhaps too, being still a fine woman for her age, she was not ill-pleased in the consciousness of looking her best, attired in a gorgeous robe of violet ribbed silk, kept for very state occasions, and a leghorn bonnet, with a stylish plume of feathers, to match the dress.

“How admirably that colour becomes you, mamma,” Margaret ventured to observe as they took their seats in the carriage opposite to each other, for the sake of additional

room. "I wonder you do not wear it always, even in preference to black."

"It would be less economical," was the quick reply, though there were signs of the little compliment being appreciated. Then, after a minute's pause, and looking, for the first time, criticizingly at her daughter, the mother added—

"But how very plainly you have dressed yourself, to-day, Margaret—almost dowdily, I declare. I don't like young people in black silk, and you, especially, require light, soft shades of colour. What is your fancy for going out to lunch at this grand place habited like a nun?"

"I had no intention of habiting myself like a nun," said Margaret, with a grave smile (she was feeling strangely grave and sober this morning); "but it was too cold for muslin, which I prefer to anything else when I have to be nicely dressed, and my only light silk seemed too light for such a sunless day. There will be nobody to meet us, you know, and I don't imagine either Mr. Fletcher or Rhoda to be very observant of outward attire."

Then she would fain have been excused from any further conversation, and left at liberty to pursue the current of her own thoughts — a somewhat agitated, rippling current just now, but leading onwards, Margaret believed in her inmost heart, towards a broad river of calm and sweet contentment.

Unhappily, however, Mrs. Bellew was in an unusually talkative mood, though this, by-the-by, was an invariable result of her daughter being in a silent one; and she had observations to make on a hundred trifling matters that cropped up in the progress of their leisurely drive through Ditchley, and along the pretty bowery lanes leading from the town to the Hall. First, they had to pass the very gates of the rectory—a hallowed spot in Mrs. Bellew's estimation, and demanding not only a loudly uttered sigh or two, in reference to her shattered castle, but an outspoken tribute of respect to the merits of the absent ecclesiastic, for whose temporary loss to his parish and herself, Margaret, sitting there so serenely unconscious of her iniquity, was nevertheless solemnly responsible. Then they drove by the church, as

heavy and ugly a specimen of patched and confused architecture as could be seen in all England, but possessing a charm in Mrs. Bellew's eyes, on its rector's account, which elicited now some approving comments, mingled with strictures upon both the curates, and the expression of a doubt as to whether she could make up her mind to attend public worship again while the Reverend Caleb Jones had it all his own way.

As Margaret was expected to give a sign of interest, at least, in everything her companion had from time to time been saying, her thankfulness and relief were great when, at length, the tedious drive came to an end, and their modest vehicle drew up in front of the wide, imposing steps, leading to the massive, ancient, brass-studded doors of Ditchley Hall.

Mr. Fletcher, with Rhoda, calm and smiling behind him, received his guests at the top of the flight of steps, and offering at once his arm, with marked courtesy and friendliness, to Mrs. Bellew, led her into the drawing-room—proud, it must be inferred,

of the opportunity of playing cavalier to so magnificent a lady, while he would deem his niece quite sufficient escort for a plainly-dressed, quiet, unobtrusive little woman like Margaret.

Lunch came almost immediately, Mrs. Bellew having so arranged that there would be no time for idle gossiping before that meal, which of course represented her own and her daughter's dinner.

There was no fault to be found with anything here. David Fletcher's establishment was not splendid, but it had always been an admirably-conducted one, the late Mrs. Fletcher reckoning order and perfect management amongst her few virtues, and the present housekeeper scrupulously maintaining, now that the responsibility devolved on her, the old *régime*.

It was long since Mrs. Bellew had seen so elegantly-appointed a table (Rhoda having attended to the flower department), or partaken of dishes cooked with such delicacy and refinement. But there was no superabundance, no ostentation, nothing which

she could afterwards lay hold of to say "the man wanted to impress me with his wealth and his grandeur, and to make me feel how vastly superior was his position to ours." So far from this, David's whole manner and deportment, while sitting at the head of his own table, were suggestive of marked humility and deference to his eldest guest. He talked scarcely at all to Margaret—she and Rhoda getting on very pleasantly together—but he devoted himself untiringly to the mother, and really managed to entertain that somewhat difficult lady with praiseworthy skill, considering how long he had been at war with society, and how much less than most men he understood of any women's tastes and ways.

When lunch was quite over, Mrs. Bellew was consulted as to whether she would like to go into the grounds at once, or to rest for awhile in the drawing-room, where the master of the house mentioned that he had a rather choice collection of engravings, which he had brought with him from Paris some years ago, to submit to her inspection.

"Oh, I will sit and look at the engravings first," said the lady, who, having been tempted to drink two or three glasses of rare old wine, instead of her usual half pint of very small beer, probably felt a little drowsy and indolent; "I never care to walk immediately after my dinner."

So they all adjourned to the drawing-room, a very charming apartment looking on the front terrace, which sloped gently down to a fine expansive lawn, having a gravelled pathway on either side of it, and leading both right and left to the flower-gardens and shrubberies for which the Hall was so justly famous.

As soon as Rhoda, on a hint from her uncle, had carried the large portfolios to a table near which Mrs. Bellew was comfortably seated, and had drawn her own chair close enough to enable her to do the honours of the engravings, David plucked up spirit and courage to propose to Margaret (who had been examining a cabinet of Italian marbles at the other end of the room) that she should come at once, under

his escort, into the grounds, as he wanted particularly to show her the fernery, which was, unhappily (alas! for the hypocrisy of men in love!) at a greater distance from the house than Mrs. Bellew might care to walk.

And although Mrs. Bellew looked up sharply from a magnificent view of "The Bridge of Sighs" as this was said, neither David nor Margaret felt bound to take so slight a demonstration as a token of that lady's not approving Mr. Fletcher's very reasonable suggestion. Margaret, indeed, acknowledged frankly that she was quite impatient to get out of doors; but she did not omit, in leaving the room, to turn smilingly to her mother and Rhoda, and to bid them follow as soon as they had exhausted the treasures of the portfolio.

"You must not grudge me the little time I have secured you to myself," said David, half reproachfully, as they began the circuit of the beautiful lawn—"Don't you know I have been looking forward to the happiness of to-day, as a prisoner looks for the day of his release from captivity?"

Instead of making a direct answer to this, which might have been spoken by any man to any woman, and might embody either an earnest truth or be the expression of a mere idle compliment, Margaret (tenderly and thoughtfully suiting her pace to that of her companion) said, in those low soft tones of hers which always conveyed the idea of a perfect sympathy with whomsoever she was addressing—

“ I was anxious to tell you that I had, at last, been to your beloved cemetery. I walked out there alone on Sunday evening and enjoyed it, in a certain fashion, very much. The situation is delightful, and the upper part, amongst the cypresses, exquisitely tasteful and sweet. One would like to rest, after life's fitful fever, in such a tranquil, holy spot. I remained for awhile by your wife's grave, where the shade is deepest, and everything most suggestive of solemn thoughts.”

David had winced a little at this abrupt mention of his late wife, by the woman beside him, as though a nerve had been

touched which was too sensitive to bear as yet the softest contact of human fingers—but he rallied almost instantly, knowing it was Margaret—the Margaret whose tender eyes, looking sorrowfully upon his hurt one April morning, had begun even then their work of healing—who had spoken now, and recalled his thoughts to a past he was ever striving to bury in oblivion. Doubtless she had done it with some kind intent, or, at the least, without the shadow of a suspicion that it was calculated to wound.

“I am glad you liked the cemetery,” he said, making an effort to speak as cheerfully as he had been doing before—“and perhaps I ought to be glad, or grateful, at any rate, that you lingered with interest near my poor wife’s grave. Heaven knows there is a whole world of pathos centred in that isolated spot, for those who have even a superficial acquaintance with the dismal story of our two lives. You, you above every other created being”—here David’s voice rose to sudden passion and intensity—“I wish to understand the whole and exact truth, to take in that there

were faults on my side as well as on hers, to believe that the woman who undoubtedly darkened God's happy earth to me, for eighteen long years, was sinned against by me, her husband, to an extent that, if it could not justify, must at least have palliated her own sinning. Shall I tell you why it has become a necessity to me that you should comprehend all this?" he added, in lowered tones of even trembling emotion, while Margaret's heart was beating too fast for her to have been able to reply had reply been wanting. "Then let us sit in this little sheltered temple for awhile," (they had reached the shrubberies now, and were passing the stone summer-house to which David alluded) "and I will, at least, end the suspense, which is becoming very hard for me to bear patiently."

When they were seated (for Margaret was quite sufficiently agitated herself to approve of her companion's suggestion), David turned to her with a look of pathetic humility, mingled with one of almost agonizing entreaty, and just venturing to touch the hand

that was holding, somewhat unsteadily, a daphne spray he had gathered for her, said hoarsely—

“Margaret, it will not surprise you to hear to-day that I have dared to love you. I think I loved you with the whole strength of my being, from the hour you sat with me under your cedar tree, and looked with your tender eyes into mine, sorrowing that they reflected back none of your own gladness on that sweet April morning. Dearest, I ask you now to be my wife, if you can give me even a little love in return for the lavish abundance I cannot choose but bestow on you. Reckoning by weeks and months, our acquaintance has been a short one, but friendship is not a thing of dates, and there are some natures which understand each other, and develop strange affinities, in a moment. Can you conscientiously leave this dear hand in mine, and tell me you will be my precious wife for all time because you feel you can love me (wholly unworthy of your sweetness though I am) *as a husband?*”

Margaret was deathly pale in that mo-

ment, impressed with a solemnity and even to sadness which she found it difficult fully to understand—but she was thinking more of poor David than of herself, and, closing her trembling fingers gently round his, she answered, in a clear steadfast voice, though it was hardly raised above a whisper,

“I shall glory in being your wife, and in striving to make you forget all the bitterness and sorrow of the past. But you must never doubt me, never think that I am giving you less affection than you are giving me. I am a woman, not a mere impulsive girl, you know, and I have made very sure of my own heart.”

“Then, may Heaven for ever bless you, my best and dearest,” exclaimed David, drawing his future wife, for one supreme minute, into his long empty and yearning arms. “Oh, Margaret, *my* Margaret, I could die of this moment’s joy, if it did not seem too rapturous to be believed in, too intense to belong, by right, to such an one as I.”

Margaret did not speak, for indeed she

knew her voice to be full of tears, and she wanted David, her David henceforth, to extract only brightness from this eventful hour of both their lives ; but her silence and unconscious gravity alarmed the poor self-mistrustful man,—ever too ready to question his own capacity for winning love,—and in a tone of sudden torturing suspicion, and putting Margaret almost sternly from him, he cried bitterly,

“ Do not, for mercy’s sake, deceive either me or yourself by mistaking pity for love—such pity as women like you who are half angels can feel for the veriest wretch who ever disgraced the earth, if he chances to be unhappy. I tell you, Margaret, I must have love for love ; it is love my soul is thirsting for—nothing short of this will stay its passionate cravings—Nay, you must hear all the truth ; if I discovered, after you had become my wife, that you loved me not, that you shrank from me, in your inmost heart, as that other woman shrank, however good, and pitiful, and tender you might remain, such a revelation would destroy me, body and soul !

I am not a saint, Margaret, like my little niece yonder ; I am only a very frail mortal man, and as sure as I breathe the healthy breath of life at this moment, I should end, with my own hands, the existence which your mistake would have made intolerable. But I am raving, my love," he added abruptly, in a softer, milder voice, " and you have grown as pale as the whitest lily. Oh, my Margaret, forgive me, in remembrance of all I *have* suffered at one woman's cruel hands, and speak to me some little word of comfort."

Margaret was wise in her generation, as well as tender. She saw at once that passionate and earnest protestations on her part, even had she been inclined to utter them, would not have met the present case. So she only said in her very simplest and quietest manner—

" David, I do love you, and I am not at all afraid of your making any discoveries that will hurt you when I am your wife."

And then she smiled and put up her still pale face that he might kiss it, and be at rest.

Poor David Fletcher's cup was full now,

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and he might well doubt the power of destiny to bring him ever again an hour so blissful, so complete in all satisfying and intoxicating sweetness, as the present.

END OF VOL. I.







